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BUFFALO BILL'S

BLUE BELT BRIGADE; OR,



SUNFLOWER

A STRANGE STORY OF
FRONTIER, MINING,
and ARMY LIFE.

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AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S BLUFF," "BUF-
FALO BILL'S LEAGUE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

HUNTED MEN.

"Well, good pard, if we get caught in
this storm without shelter the chances
are that coyotes will pick our bones."

THE SPORT EXTENDED HIS HAND AND BUFFALO BILL GRASPED IT WITH A GRIP
THAT MEANT BUSINESS.

The speaker was Buffalo Bill, then chief of scouts in the great Northwest.

He was a hundred miles from the fort, or help, and a storm of desperate fierceness was threatening.

The scout had just escaped one severe blizzard with his life, and was hastening to reach the fort, but the tempest was gathering and long experience told him that man and beast must die if they were to be exposed to snow, chilling winds, and below zero weather.

"I can dare danger of death at man's hands, but this fighting nature makes the odds too great against us, old pard."

"But we'll not say die until the last, will we?"

As before he addressed his horse, his faithful pard.

The scene was in the wilds of the mountains, and Buffalo Bill's only chance was to seek some sheltered nook in a canyon, and there do the best he could to keep from freezing until the blizzard was over, when, if he had strength, he could try and reach the fort.

"Ah! But those outlaws will have to pay for bringing me here in the face of winter."

"But, then, if they have no retreat here, they, too, will perish."

"I wonder if they would take me in were I to happen upon their den?"

"I would not like particularly to try them, for they might be only too anxious to do so—ah! there is a trail!"

"It is not a very fresh one, but I'll follow where it leads, for it cannot go far, and the horses were shod, so Indians did not make it."

He glanced down attentively at the well-marked trail of a dozen horses, made several days before, then looked anxiously at the gathering storm, and started off at a gallop.

He was splendidly mounted, had a rifle and belt of arms, a large roll of blankets in rubber covering, and a good supply of provisions and camping outfit.

The horse did not seem to regard his heavy burden, but went along rapidly as though he felt shelter was not far distant.

A ride of a mile up a narrow canyon with high cliffs upon either side, brought the scout suddenly into a basin several acres in size.

There was a lake there and plenty of timber, the very place for shelter.

But the eyes of the scout were not fixed upon the spot as a sheltered retreat, but at a strange sight his eyes had suddenly fallen upon.

A camp was before him. It was a camp of white men, and they were lying and crouching around a fire.

They were all the picture of despair. Haggard-faced, sunken-eyed, thinly-clad, half-starved, miserable wretches, they looked, a picture of utter woe and despair.

At sight of the horseman appearing so suddenly before them, they did not move. Some muttered words were heard, and every eye was upon him.

They had a rickety shelter of boughs, and in the basin several horses were staked out to feed, while a number of saddles were where the men were.

Instantly Buffalo Bill spurred forward and drew rein right before them. His eyes seemed fascinated at what they gazed upon, and from his lips most emphatically broke the cry:

"My God!"

Not one of the group of men spoke. There were a dozen of them, crouching about the fire, and a form lay upon the ground, face upturned, hands clasped upon the heart—dead.

"Are you the men driven from Yellow Dust City by the miners," asked Buffalo Bill in almost plaintive tones.

"We are," was the reply of one of the men.

"You were secretly robbing your fellow-miners, and were given your choice of going into the mountains in the face of approaching winter or to suffer death by hanging?"

"That was it," said the man who had before spoken.

"Outlawed from all camps, you came here?"

"Yes, to die."

"If your worst foes saw you now they would pity you."

"Our foes have no pity. Are you our foe also, Buffalo Bill?"

"You know me, though I do not recall having met one of you before."

"But you have, though, no matter when or where."

"Are you our foe, Buffalo Bill?"

"I was sent to follow your trail, to see that you did not halt in the mountains."

"We have halted."

"How could you do otherwise?"

"God only knows. We are hunted men, wild beasts as it were, and yet we are now doomed."

"From my inmost heart I pity you!" said Buffalo Bill, earnestly.

"Men, I shall save you!"

"I shall right this awful wrong done you, so help me God!"

The voice of Buffalo Bill rang out like a trumpet, and his cheery words and manner brought a feeble cheer from the crippled crew, and they at once were inspired with hope and strength.

Springing from his horse, Buffalo Bill drew off the saddle, staked him out, set a pot of coffee on to boil, and then seizing the axe he went into the timber and made it fly as only a woodsman can.

Pines, cedars, and saplings were cut down, and the men with one arm dragged them against the cliff, where the scout said they would build their shelter.

The men that had lost a foot balanced themselves as best they could, hopped around, and, strengthened by the coffee, forgot their pains in their work.

In the midst of their work up the canyon dashed a herd of deer, seeking shelter.

They halted in surprise at the camp, and instantly the repeating rifle of the scout began to rattle, and one, two, three fell dead.

Leaving them where they had fallen, to be looked after later, Buffalo Bill went on with his work.

Two, three hours passed, and the shelter was finished, the fire built in it in a crevice in the cliffs, pine straw spread for beds, and all the blankets the poor wretches had left to them, placed where they would give the most comfort.

The other shelter was patched up for the horses, the deer were dressed, and hung up, and the scout's supplies gotten out to give all a good, square meal.

It was needed, for the men were upon the verge of starvation.

"We are ready for the storm, men!" cried Buffalo Bill, cheerily, as all that could be done was attended to, and a moment after he called out:

"And here it is upon us!"

The black clouds had trailed low, and came sweeping over the mountain range with irresistible fury.

The darkness of night had fallen upon the scene, for the sun, near its setting, had been blotted out by the inky blackness of the heavens.

With a glance at the shelter of the horses, another at the one he had worked so hard to build, to see if they would stand the force of the gale, Buffalo Bill was glad to realize that they would, for did they not death would be the fate of all, for the weather had dropped down near the zero mark.

"This canyon is a safe shelter, and our horses will stand."

"My! But this is an awful bitter night," and Buffalo Bill was glad to go into the narrow opening that led to the cheerful protection within.

CHAPTER III.

THE SCOUT SAMARITAN.

The indoors was only cheerful by contrast with the without, Buffalo Bill was compelled to admit to himself.

He closed the opening that served as a door, threw more wood upon the fire in the large crevice in the rock that served as a fire-place and chimney, and the heat thrown out took the chill off of the little shelter. Around the fire were grouped the men, and they had left a space in one corner for the scout.

The fire lit up their haggard faces, and the scene was not a happy one.

The saddles had been packed up at the heads of their blanket beds, wood in plenty was piled up on either side, and all knew that they had been saved from a terrible death by Buffalo Bill, their foe.

But the poor cripples did not so regard him now, and they gazed at him with admiration and gratitude as he came in and dropped down in the space left for him.

"This is a fearful night, men."

"Just hark to the fierce wind, and how the sleet drives against our house;

"I have heard many crimes laid upon you, have heard of your red deeds, of your robberies of poor miners, but in the sight of Heaven I swear you did not deserve this monstrous punishment."

"But come! Do not give up, for bad off as you all are, it might be worse."

"Those of you who can must work, must help me, and I will save you if man can do it."

"See yonder clouds? A few more hours and they will break upon us, and you are sure to perish if not protected better than you are."

"There is an axe, and I can do wonders with that, while I have food enough for all, at least for several days."

but, never fear, we are all right here, and can weather it out without suffering."

"Except yourself, sir, there is the best one off in our lot," said a man bitterly, and he motioned to the rear of the cabin to where lay the form of their dead comrade, for they had not had a moment's time to bury him.

"Now, don't get gloomy, pards, for I consider this first-class, and I'll do all I can for you," replied Buffalo Bill cheerily, and yet there was a heavy weight upon his heart as he looked around upon that wretched crew.

Each one was naturally suffering much with their severed limbs, for the cruel work had only been done several weeks before.

The stumps of arms and legs had been bound up as best they could, with what could be obtained, and Buffalo Bill, seeing this, said:

"Now the first thing is for me to do what I can for your wounds.

"I am no doctor, but I have seen more wounds than most of them have, and fortunately always go well prepared, for I have a case along, in which there is lint, bandages, salves, and all I need.

"Come, pard, you seem to be the worst sufferer, so I'll look to you first."

Water was heated, the awkwardly bandaged leg taken in charge, and the scout samaritan began work.

"This was not a bad amputation at any rate, and the one who did it was a surgeon beyond doubt," said the scout.

"We do not know, sir, for he was completely masked," said Burt Boyd, who seemed the leader of the party.

"He was masked?" asked Buffalo Bill in surprise.

"Yes, sir."

"Why was that?"

"All of them were."

"Those who pursued you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you did not know them?"

"Not one."

"How many were there?"

"Twenty-seven."

"They were miners, of course?"

"They were men of the mines, sir."

"That means you do not know their occupation, though they were from the mines?"

"When was this done?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Where?"

"In Death Valley."

"Ah!"

"Did you go there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"We thought there at least we could rest in safety."

"You know the stories told of Death Valley?"

"Oh, yes. It was on account of what was said of the valley that we went there."

"Poor fellows! You did not expect to be tracked there?"

"No, sir."

"How did you expect to live there?"

"We had ample supplies with us, supposed we could get more, game was there in abundance, and you know it is said that gold was found there."

"Yes, and you were willing to take all risks and hunt gold?"

"We were, sir."

"And those men, twenty-seven in number, you say, trailed you there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Coming from Yellow Dust City?"

"We do not know, sir."

"We awoke to find our camp surrounded with armed men, and we surrendered under false promises or we would have fought it out, and, ah! How much better it would have been for us to have died then, than to suffer as we have!"

"And after your surrender?"

"We were bound hand and foot, and this doom was visited upon us," and Burt Boyd held up his right arm with the hand severed at the wrist.

"Others suffered worse than I even,

as you see for yourself, and those among us who are fortunate are the dead, like poor Marcy there."

"Then others are dead?"

"Yes, we were fifteen, and the maiming, with cold, hunger, and despair took five off."

"Who will be the next to go, God only knows, and none of us care, for human nature can bear no more."

"Men, I pity you, and the wrongs you have suffered shall not go unpunished, for, be your crimes what they may, this is a greater one against you," and Buffalo Bill spoke with deadly earnestness.

One by one the leg or arm of the poor wretches was dressed by the scout, and each man felt far less pain, far more comfortable when it was done.

In spite of the one blanket left to them, those of the dead were brought into service, and with the scout's generously sharing his own, the poor fellows felt that they would be fairly comfortable upon their pine straw beds.

A substantial supper had also given them renewed strength, and Buffalo Bill having piled more logs upon the fire, said:

"Men, this storm will last several days, but when it ends I shall start for the fort.

"No wagon can reach you here, so here you may have to remain all winter; but I will come back and bring with me supplies, blankets, and warm clothing for you, and more, my pards, the surgeon scout, Doctor Frank Powell, I know will accompany me, and see to your wounds, for some of you need attention that only a skilled surgeon can give.

"But, brace up, and all will yet come well," and the scout turned into his blankets for the night with the words echoing in his ears:

"Buffalo Bill, you are, indeed, a Good Samaritan!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE LOST MINERS.

The storm did last several days, and the canyon was blocked with snow.

But Buffalo Bill swung the axe hard each day and piled up within reach a lot of wood that would last for weeks.

He also improved the shelter as best he could against another storm, and did all that was possible for the protection of the unfortunate band of cripples that had fallen so strangely under his care.

With pick and shovel he had dug a grave for the dead comrade of the unfortunates, and the very next day he had again to face the merciless wind and driving sleet to make another grave.

One more unfortunate had let go life's cable, and was free from his sufferings.

With the third day the storm broke, the sun shone out warm and bright, and its influence was at once felt.

The horses were glad to get out and feed, and Buffalo Bill had no difficulty in finding half a dozen deer to bring down with his rifle.

Provisions were growing scant, and the scout's supply would last but a week longer, for he had to take some for his trail to the fort.

But, well and strong himself, he was self-sacrificing, and barely took food enough for two days.

"You distress us by going with so little, sir," said Burt Boyd.

"Never mind me, for you need all the nourishment you can get in your present condition."

"I will get along all right, for the further I go, the easier traveling it will be, and I hope to be back in a few days, so keep up your courage, and watch for my return."

The dawn was just creeping up the canyon the next morning when Buffalo Bill had his breakfast, bade farewell to the band of hunted men, and mounting his horse, rode away on his long and dangerous trail to the fort.

It was by no means easy traveling, but horse and rider were game, and

struggled on, and night found them some thirty miles on their way.

It was a cold and uncomfortable camp for the scout, but his horse found grass in plenty, and he did as best he could.

The second night found him about half the distance to the fort, and his supplies would only last until breakfast the following morning.

As he was looking for a sheltered spot in which to camp, his horse gave a low neigh, and a moment after the scout saw the glimmer of a fire ahead.

Then another and another came into view.

Could it be possible that a party of cavalry on the scout had been belated by the storm, he wondered.

Then he remembered that Yellow Dust City was only about fifty miles away, and perhaps the storm had overtaken some miners from that camp, for he knew of nothing else that would account for the fires, unless a band of Indians had been snowed in.

If Indians he knew he had to be careful, for they would long for his scalp.

If miners, he would be all right, which would also be the case if they were soldiers.

Then the thought came to him that there were prowling bands of road-agents along the Overland Trails, and they might have a retreat up in those mountains.

All things considered, he knew that he must act with great caution.

Night was coming on, and he rode slowly toward the camp-fires.

Soon he saw that it was a camp of white men.

They were not soldiers he saw at a glance.

They were not outlaws, for they were too numerous for a band of road-agents.

They, therefore, must be miners.

With this belief he rode up to the camp and hailed.

The men sprung to their feet in surprise, and one called out:

"Who are you and from whence do you come?"

Convinced that they were miners caught out in the storm, Buffalo Bill said:

"I am an army scout and on my way to Fort Rescue."

A wild cheer greeted these words, and the men rushed from about the fires to greet the scout.

He saw that they were in miners' garb, but their faces were drawn and suffering, and all seemed to be in distress.

"Who are you, pard?" he asked, glancing over the group.

"A party of prospectors out from Yellow Dust City. We got caught in the storm ten days ago, lost our way in the mountains, the second blizzard nearly killed the whole outfit, our provisions are about gone, and we know nothing as to where we are, and another day will do us up."

"Not so bad as that, for I will guide you to Yellow Dust City."

A yell answered this assertion, and a man asked:

"Can you do it?"

"I can."

"Do you really know where you are, with the snow scattered over the country as it is?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly."

"Then you must be Buffalo Bill, the scout?"

"That is what I am called."

Another yell of joy, and the men gathered around the scout grasping his hand, and acting in their delight like children turned out of school.

"When will we get there, for our horses are nearer dead than we are," asked the leader.

Buffalo Bill glanced over the crowd of upturned faces, then to the horses in the background, and said:

"My advice is to start at once, for another storm is threatening, and we have no time to lose, for, if caught in a blizzard, you are doomed."

"But can you find your way at night?"

"Oh, yes; and taking the risk of going is better than the certainty of death by staying here," was the reply.

Ten minutes after the half-starved men mounted their almost used-up horses and followed Buffalo Bill through the darkness out over the trackless land in the struggle for life.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAIL OF DEATH.

Buffalo Bill had been right about another storm threatening, for as they rode out of the timber all could see that the skies were becoming overcast with clouds, and no longer a star was visible.

This made the darkness greater, but the unerring guide held on his way without hesitation, and the men followed with perfect confidence, for the name of Buffalo Bill alone had given them hope.

They had ample clothing and blankets for any ordinary weather and had come out well supplied, they said, for a short prospecting tour in the mountains, but the first storm that had belated them had caused them to lose their way, and the second one had delayed them until their provisions were gone, and they were staring death straight in the face when Buffalo Bill found their camp.

With horses broken down and half starved, for want of grass, their own supplies gone, the cold intense, and not knowing where they were, their doom was sealed, and it was but a question of a short while more when they would have given up and lain down to die.

But on through the night over the frozen ground rode their guide.

A ridge was ahead of them, and all drew a sigh of relief when Buffalo Bill struck unerringly a canyon that cut it in twain.

This proved that he knew just what he was about.

A halt was made in some cedars in the canyon, fires built, and the last morsels of food passed around, the scout putting in his little supply with the others.

Helped by the meagre food, warmed by the fire, and with their horses given a feed off the grass found in the canyon where the wind had swept the snow away, they again mounted and pushed on once more.

They saw that the scout had increased his pace, and a glance upward at the skies, growing blacker and blacker, and listening to the rising wind, told the cause.

All through the night the guide pushed on, seldom at fault, and, after a halt of a minute now and then, when momentarily at a loss, not a word would be said.

The dawn broke cold, cheerless, and threatening.

There was no food now, nothing for man or beast, silent as spectres, suffering, fearing, hoping, with their whole trust placed in the cloaked form ahead, the men followed, struggling for life, yet dreading death.

Would the cold, dreary trail never end?

Was the scout really going true, or was he at fault, to find it out when the storm burst upon them?

If the storm came, could they keep on, for their tired horses were staggering then?

If right, then, would not the blinding snow, when it came, confuse their van-guide, and then death come to all?

These, and many more, the men asked themselves and each other.

They were so completely lost themselves, so worn out, cold, and hopeless, they could hardly believe that Buffalo Bill even could save them.

At last there was a cry from behind the long line.

The rear horse had gone down never to rise again.

"Don't stop to urge him, for he cannot get up."

"Send his rider here to mount behind me!"

The order came from the scout, but the rider was hurt, shivering with cold, and could not walk.

Buffalo Bill rode to the rear rapidly, swung the man up behind him, and spurred to the front again, his horse not appearing to mind the double weight.

The men saw their leader push on. He had called out cheering words to them as he rode by them.

Suddenly back came the words: "An hour more, men, and you are safe!"

The men gave a cheer, and presently one called out:

"He is right, boys! See! Do you not know that hill, the Tower Rock?"

Another cheer showed that the men had recognized the tower-like rock indicated.

But, just then, the snow began to fall. It came in gusts at first, then steadily, then began to drive savagely into their faces. It fell so thick and fast, came so fiercely, that they could not see a rod about them.

But the unerring guide held on. He seemed to be guided by something they could not see.

They did not know that long experience was proving his ally, and he was going along by watching the ground, seeing just where the trail should go, and not trying to observe distant surroundings.

Another horse went down, then another, and their riders found mounts behind others, until their animals also failed them.

At last came the order: "Let the men riding the weakest horses slip from their saddles and follow, clinging to the animals' tails for support."

It was done, and soon half the command was dismounted.

Suddenly a man fell from the saddle. He could not be aroused.

"Come on, or all will go the same way," sternly commanded the guide.

A few moments more and another man fell by the way.

"Come on!"

The men did not need the order. They were indifferent.

Then a cabin came in sight. The guide hailed and several men appeared in the door.

"Go back a quarter of a mile and bring in two men!"

"Humanity demands it!" commanded the guide.

And on he led for ten, twenty minutes more, when the men came up to the door of "The Golden Arms," the tavern of the settlement.

Eager and willing hands came to their aid, and the leader, stronger than his men, turned to the unerring guide.

But Buffalo Bill was gone. He had ridden away in the storm, some one said.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR OTHERS' SAKE.

Having guided the men to life along the trail of death, Buffalo Bill remained for no thanks, but left them to the care of others, knowing that everything would be done for them.

Warmly clad as he was, he was himself chilled to the bone by the long night ride, and rode quickly to the house of Sule Ross, the keeper of the principal store of Yellow Dust City.

As the blizzard had driven every one to their homes, the store was closed, and Sule Ross answered the hail of the scout and with his partner quickly did all in his power to warm and refresh him after his desperate ride.

"Why, Cody, did you not know better than to start from your camp in the face of such a storm?" asked Sule Ross, as the scout sat at the table before a blazing fire drinking a bowl of hot coffee.

"When it was simply a camp without shelter, and with no food and little wood, blankets scarce, and death certain if I remained, what else could I do, Sule?"

"You are right; but you are weather-wise, and I am surprised that you were caught thus."

"I was off on a scout."

"But I want supplies, Sule; some extra blankets, a small tent, and a fine pack horse, for I must be off after dinner."

"Are you a fool, Bill Cody?"

"I have never been accused of being one, whatever else I may be guilty of."

"Do you mean that you are going to again face this blizzard?"

"I must."

"The urgency must be great."

"It is."

"Why, you will not get a mile before you are lost."

"Pardon me, but the trail to Fort Rescue, for I go that way, is down the valley for many miles, along the bank of the stream, and I can camp to-night in Cave Canyon and be that far on my way when to-morrow comes."

"Then I have a canyon trail for many miles, and I can cross the plains with my compass, and there will only be snow drifts there, which I can avoid."

"I can reach the fort in two days' travel after to-day."

"What is the demand, Bill, for you to risk your life?"

"To save others."

"Ah! Then there are others snowed in that you are going to return for?"

"From the fort, yes."

"But Sule!"

"Yes."

"We have been friends ever since you were a sergeant of the Fifth Cavalry at Fort McPherson."

"And ever will be, Bill, for I can never forget one to whom I owe the debt I do to you."

"But for your coming through just such a blizzard as this to our aid, our troop would have perished, every one of us."

"I knew that, and so urged the colonel to let me go, and this is a case even more important, where lives depend wholly upon me."

"But, as my friend, I ask you not to breathe a word of this to any one."

"You do not wish it known that you are going?"

"No, or that there is any one to be aided."

"I am going to the fort, you know, with all haste, to prevent searching parties being sent out after me—nothing else."

"I understand; but who—"

"Sh!—I will answer nothing else, now."

"There comes your partner, so have him get my supplies together for me."

"I will," and the order was given for the best horse that Sule Ross had to go as a pack animal, and a small "A" tent, with a couple of buffalo and bear robes, extra blankets, and a good supply of provisions, was soon gotten together for the daring man to start upon his terrible journey.

But Buffalo Bill argued to himself that if he did not take the risk and waited in Yellow Dust City until the storm was over, he would not be able to reach the fort in time, and then get to the crippled crew of outlaws who were depending upon him before another storm would be upon them, and then their fate was sealed.

By taking the risk he could perhaps reach the fort by the end of the storm, which generally blew itself out in three days.

His own danger and suffering he did not take into consideration where the lives of others, though outlaws, hung in the balance.

Their maimed limbs, haggard faces, and trust in him appealed to his manhood, his heart, and his nerve.

He would do or die for them.

More could not be asked or expected.

After a hearty dinner with Sule Ross, just four hours after his arrival in Yellow Dust City.

low Dust City, Buffalo Bill mounted his horse, which seemed as good as ever, took the pack animal in lead, and rode out of the cabin stable into the fierce blizzard.

"God bless you, Bill," rang in his ears from Sule Ross, as he faced the icy wind and driving snow.

Muffled up, head, hands, body, and feet, he did not feel the chill winds, and his horses were blanketed also for protection.

Past the Golden Arms he went, and men standing at the windows asked:

"What fool is that?"

But no one knew, though a miner replied:

"It's a grizzly bear on horseback, pards, taking a look at Yellow Dust City in weather that he likes."

This caused a laugh all around, until one man called out:

"It is Buffalo Bill, by Heaven!"

"That man saved our lives, and now he is going to his death, for that trail leads to the fort."

"I will stop him!"

But as he opened the door the savage wind fairly dashed him back, and there was such a howl from all present that he was glad to give up his good intentions and rush to the fire and warmth.

And, as he glanced out from his muffers when riding by the Golden Arms, Buffalo Bill muttered:

"They are all right, now; but there would have been twenty-seven dead men when this day broke had I not found them."

"Yes, there were twenty-seven."

"Just the number that were in the band that met those outlaws."

CHAPTER VII.

A DESPERATE RIDE.

Buffalo Bill found that his horse knew what was expected of him.

He had been on that trail before several times, and he bent his head low and pushed ahead at a slow but steady pace.

The pack horse came behind, giving no trouble by pulling back on his lead line, and apparently willing to go where man dare venture.

The last miners' cabin was left behind, and no longer did a cheery fire shine forth to render the scout's position more uncomfortable by comparison with the warmth within.

The wind was blowing too fiercely for the snow to lie, and the drifts were avoided, the trail down the river reached and then followed.

All was tempest now, and darkness overhead and about the lone wayfarer. He dared not stop, for the Cave Canyon was to be reached by night, for there shelter would be found.

Knowing that his horses could get little if any grass, the scout had brought along a bushel of corn for them, so they would be able to keep up their strength and animal warmth.

It was terrible traveling at times for here and there snow drifts had to be gone through, and several times the animals went down in the depths.

But up again and on was Buffalo Bill's will, and they pushed along, undaunted by anything.

As night drew near, the clouds appeared to trail lower and look blacker, and the snow came down like a hurricane; yet on the noble steeds went, guided by the master hand.

Darker and darker grew the clouds, but the Cave Canyon was not far off, and Buffalo Bill urged the horses to swifter pace.

Soon the cliffs loomed up, the canyon was reached, and on the lee side Buffalo Bill found one of the large caverns that had given it its name.

He rode right in, and the horses gave a snort of delight to be out of the cold.

There was a growth of cedars at the base of the cliff, and so fallen wood was plentiful, and Buffalo Bill quickly gathered a good supply and carried it into the cavern, where he built a fire.

The cavern was, strictly speaking, only a crevice in the rocks, but it was arched over, large enough for a score of horses, and through a crevice in the rear end the smoke found quick exit, the fire drawing with the roar of a massive chimney.

Of course, there was no use to pitch the tent with such shelter, and the scout unsaddled his horses, fed them, spread his blankets, and then began to prepare his own supper.

Without the winds howled appallingly, but, though the cavern was draughty, it was free from snow, and man and horse could be comfortable.

Without it would have been death to all.

But Buffalo Bill congratulated himself that he had such good shelter, had come twenty miles upon his way, and, with the guide marks he knew well he could not be lost.

If the storm grew worse, as it appeared to be doing, he would push on to another place, where he knew he would find fairly good shelter for his horses and himself, plenty of wood, and, if only a dozen miles further on, it would be that much to his credit.

With this thought, he warmed himself well, saw that the horses were well blanketed, and, lying down in his bed, was soon fast asleep, for he had had a very trying experience he had to admit in the past twenty-four hours.

Dawn broke and found the storm still raging, though the snow had turned to sleet.

A good feed for the horses, a roaring fire, excellent breakfast, and the desperate ride was resumed.

Once out of the Cave Canyon, and Buffalo Bill realized how desperate, indeed, his undertaking was; still, there was nothing for it but to stagger on, and staggering it was for the horses over the icy ground.

The exercise kept them warmed up, however, and Buffalo Bill was too well bundled up to be very cold.

Slow work it was, however, and it was noon when the shelter that the scout had in mind was reached.

It was a narrow canyon, with breaks in it here and there, but with wood plentiful.

He knew that he dared not venture on, for he could not cross the plain ahead before night, so he turned into the canyon to camp for the rest of the day and until the following morning.

The wind swept through the narrow canyon with terrible force, but when one of the breaks was reached shelter from its fury was found.

Buffalo Bill found one of these, hardly larger than a room, and with a growth of pines in it.

The snow had blocked the entrance, but not gone further, and what little drifted in did not disturb him.

He forced his horses through the drift into the protection of the pines, soon had a blazing fire, and pitched his tent facing it, and where it would be a break for the two animals, both of whom seemed glad to reach such a snug shelter from the pelting blizzard.

Thus the afternoon passed, and blanketed and standing in pine straw knee deep, the horses were certainly secured from freezing and ate their supper with a relish.

Buffalo Bill's appetite had not deserted him, and after a smoke he replenished his fire and turned in his little tent content that matters were not worse.

He had had plenty of rest in the afternoon, so he was up before dawn, had breakfast, and the moment the gray of day appeared he mounted and once more faced the fearful blasts, for the blizzard had not yet blown itself out.

CHAPTER VIII.

FIGHTING FOR LIFE.

It was a hard fight to reach the plain, through the snow drifts, but it was done in safety, and there, as he had anticipated,

Buffalo Bill saw that traveling would be easy for the horses.

The snow had been blown into great drifts, and, though avoiding these would make the distance miles further, he could push on at a good pace and not hurt his horses.

It was thirty long miles across the plain, with not a bush for shelter, no water or wood, so to be caught there would mean death.

The wind swept it with hurricane force, but fortunately it was at the scout's back.

With a few moments to rest the scout rode upon the plain, having taken his bearings by the compass he now carried in his gloved hand.

On, on he went, going as surely as the pilot guides the ship, over the trackless waves, and above him, about him, everywhere howled the blizzard, still keeping up with relentless force.

The plain was crossed and the hills beyond were reached.

The fort yet lay forty miles away, and so another night must be passed out in the elements.

But Buffalo Bill had already decided to push on to an old cabin, once a stockade fort, and there find shelter.

He knew that it was reach there or perish, for nowhere else was there shelter, and the wind is about among snow drifts on the plain had taken him hours longer than he had expected.

Fortunately his way lay under the lee of a bluff, and the eddying wind had cleared a space he could readily follow.

His horses were put into a gallop.

He could not spare them then.

There was no time for rest or food, life was at stake, and so on they went at a pace that was hard but imperative.

Night fell, and the cabin was yet several miles away.

But on, on, through the knee-deep snow and massive drifts the brave horses struggled until their strength was almost gone.

Buffalo Bill's horse knew that cabin, his instinct told him what his master was striving for, and he needed no urging.

But the led horse now hung back hard upon the lead line.

This would never do, and the scout dismounted, slipped the pack to his horse, mounted the other animal, and had to drive rowels deep to urge him on.

The good animal strove hard, staggered badly, and, after a couple of miles, went down.

But right ahead was the old stockade cabin.

Rushing to it Buffalo Bill dashed wide open the half-open door, and with yelps and snarls of fright and anger out dashed a pack of wolves that had taken refuge there.

With benumbed hands matches were found and lighted, and, as he had remembered, there was wood in plenty piled up upon each side of the large fireplace.

To build a fire, half frozen as he was, was no easy task, but it was done, and then Buffalo Bill led his own horse into the cabin, and he knew that he was just in time to have saved him also.

Out he dashed to see if he could save the other horse, but the yelping pack of starving wolves were already upon the dying beast, and the scout had to use his revolvers quickly to drive them off.

Taking off his saddle and bridle with all haste, he ran back to the cabin, closed the door, stripped the pack from his horse, and filling his coffee pot with snow put it on to boil, for he realized how badly he needed a warm drink.

There was a small stream right at the rear of the stockade he knew, but he was too cold to go to it, even had it not been frozen, so snow served his purpose for water and he soon had a good cup of coffee.

Instantly he felt the good effects, for the blood began to warm in his veins, and he said to his horse:

"I am sorry, old fellow, that you are not a coffee drinker, for it would do you a world of good."

The fire was now sending a genial heat through the room, and Buffalo Bill threw open the door that led into another room and led his horse in there, well knowing that the artificial warmth was not good for him.

He was glad to find a lot of hay there, and with bunches of it gave the horse a hard rubbing down that warmed him thoroughly.

Then he put a blanket over him, and hatchet in hand, led him out to the stream, where a hole was cut in the ice.

Eagerly the horse drank, and, taken back to shelter, he was given a good feed of corn, and a bedding of hay was spread for him on the dirt floor.

This humane duty done, the scout prepared his own supper, and was soon after wrapped in slumber and blankets before the blazing fire.

He had upon his mind the crippled crew in the mountains, and how they must suffer under this prolonged and terrific blizzard!

"I must reach the fort with all speed if I expect to find one of them alive."

"It will be a hard ride, but I will push on before dawn," was his decision as he sunk into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

A sleep of half a dozen hours made a new man of Buffalo Bill, and he arose with a determination to battle again against the elements for the lives of others.

He gave his horse the last feed of corn, for he knew there was no retreat anywhere between the cabin and the fort, and he must reach the latter or go under.

The storm still continued with unabated fury, the sleet driving hard against the cabin.

A good breakfast, with plenty of hot coffee, and he was ready for the struggle with the elements.

His horse was blanketed, but the tent, pack saddle, and all extra weight were swung up in the cabin to be sent after from the fort, for he wished to save the strength of his horse for the final fight for life.

When all ready, he led his horse into the room, and, muffled up as before, threw open the door and mounted.

The storm rushed into the cabin with a savage howl, and the darkness without was intense.

Buffalo Bill knew that the trail was not far away, and it ran along a ridge for miles. By the time he reached the end of the ridge it would be dawn, and then he could see his way.

The horse bent low to the blast, and the start was made. In wild eddies the sleet whirled about them, and here and there it was a flounder through snow drifts.

Muffled to his eyes, the scout was not cold, and the exercise kept the blood circulating in the horse.

The cold was bitter in its intensity, and the wind was yet blowing a gale, sending the sleet in stinging showers upon man and beast.

Buffalo Bill knew that nearly a week had gone since he left the maimed outlaws in the mountains depending upon him alone to save their lives.

The time was flying fast, and half of his desperate rescue trail was drawing to an end.

So on he went, and at last the gray dawn came to show him that he was right.

He had not lost the trail, for the dark line he had kept close upon his right was the ridge.

But there it ended, and another plain was to be crossed.

A dozen miles to ride with no shelter from the bitter wind, then a pass through a range into a valley, and the fort would loom up before him.

"Come, old fellow, get yourself together close, or this wind will cut your legs from under you."

"One minute until I get my bearings," and once more he appealed to his compass.

"All right; go ahead."

"It is do or die now, old pard!"

The horse seemed to know the fact as well as did the rider, and started on with quick tread.

Out into the plain, and five minutes lost the ridge, and there was no more sign of anything than at sea to guide them, only the driving sleet, and all about them mist.

The compass was true, and horse and man, well experienced, kept on with unerring step.

Hours passed, and then suddenly there arose ahead of them a high dark mass.

It was the range! Never given to expressing his feelings extravagantly, Buffalo Bill could not now resist one long, loud yell of triumph.

It was promptly answered by a glad neigh from his faithful horse.

"Ah, old fellow, you see the range, too, and know that we are saved."

"Yes, there is the canyon opening before us, and three miles more and we reach the fort. Come, old horse, come!"

On they went, the noble animal, seeming to have gotten new vigor by the words of his master.

Through the pass in the range, where they were protected from the biting winds, then out into the valley, and on the broad trail for the fort.

A stream led through the valley, and the stockade walls of the fort crossed it and was upon either side.

Upon the right bank, in a clump of timber, and crowning a hill, was the fort, a strongly built structure, commanding the valley for miles around.

It was a pleasant spot, was Fort Rescue, commanded by a dashing, daring colonel of cavalry, a bold Indian fighter, and under his command were half a thousand soldiers.

Suddenly through the driving storm the sentinel at the main entrance beheld a dark object approaching, and, hardly believing his eyes, he strained them in his endeavor to see if he could be right.

A minute more and he sprung out of the sentry box upon the stockade wall and his voice rang loudly as he shouted:

"Corporal of the guard!"

"Corporal of the guard!"

"Throw open the main gate, for Buffalo Bill is here!"

CHAPTER X.

THE LOST COMRADE.

"My God, old pard, are you going to give up, too? See! Yonder is the fort! We are right upon it! One more brave struggle and you are saved!"

So almost shouted Buffalo Bill to his noble horse, which had begun to stagger, and when the fort was looming up through the blinding storm, not a hundred yards ahead.

But the noble beast could do no more, and springing from the saddle Buffalo Bill began to draw his horse along.

"Hark! They have seen us, old pard! I hear the sentinel!"

"Don't give up here, for the love of God!" entreated the scout, as though he was pleading with a human soul not to take flight.

But the horse gasped terribly, stopped, all in a tremor, and, with a groan that was human in its utterance, fell at his master's feet.

Was it the sleet driving into the face of Buffalo Bill and rolling down his cheeks, or were they tears, freezing as they flowed, tears for the noble pard that had saved his life?

His head bent low for a moment, his hand rested caressingly upon the frost-covered head, and the tribute was paid in quivering words:

"You have done your duty, noble pard—only God can do more!"

"Ho, there! Are you mad, Cody, to stand still in this cruel tempest?"

The voice brought Buffalo Bill to a realization of his danger.

It was Captain Charlie Adams, officer of the day, who, at the call of the sentinel, had dashed out of the guard quarters, thrown open the gate, and followed by half a dozen soldiers, had run toward Buffalo Bill, where they saw him standing by the side of his horse.

"Oh, Captain Adams, I got here, but I killed my poor horse. Strip him, men, for I am about used up; and captain, I beg you to have him brought into the fort, for no coyote shall ever touch that noble brute."

"It shall be done, Cody. Sergeant, you see to it."

"Now, Cody, come with me, for you need care immediately."

"I believe I do, sir."

"How in Heaven's name did you get here?" and the captain seized Buffalo Bill's arm and dragged him along into the fort, and then straight toward the hospital.

"That dead pard of mine brought me, sir."

"But where from?"

"The Death Valley Mountains, by way of Yellow Dust City, sir."

"Why did you not stop at Yellow Dust?"

"I had to come on, for there are lives to save, Captain Adams."

"See! The clouds are breaking, the storm is over, and I will yet save them!" cried Buffalo Bill, excitedly.

"The first thing is to save you," muttered Captain Adams, and he fairly dragged Buffalo Bill into the quarters of Doctor Frank Powell, the chief surgeon of the post, while all over the garrison were heard cheers for the return of Buffalo Bill, for the news had spread like wildfire, and cabin doors were opened to give vent to shouts of joy, but quickly closed again when the storm made the occupants feel the bitter cold.

"They are cheering you, Cody, for we all gave you up as dead," said Captain Adams, as a tall form opened the door and cried:

"It is true, then?"

"Thank God, Bill, I see you alive again, for this time I nearly gave you up as dead."

It was Surgeon Frank Powell,* and without waiting to grasp the scout's hand he began to drag off of him the wraps he wore, at the same time calling to a hospital steward to prepare him a hot drink of liquor and have a cot ready at once.

"No, no! I'll take the hot drink, but no cot, doctor. I've got work to do, another trail to start over, and no time to lose."

Both Captain Adams and Surgeon Powell looked at the scout as though they believed his mind was wandering.

"Well, Powell, I will leave Cody to you," and Captain Adams returned to his duties as officer of the day, and sent an orderly to report to Colonel Lennox that Buffalo Bill, chief of scouts, had returned to the fort in a half-frozen condition, his horse dying almost at the gate, and that the scout had been taken to the quarters of Surgeon Powell.

In the meanwhile, Buffalo Bill had been made comfortable in an easy chair, had taken the hot drink, and, when Surgeon Powell insisted upon putting him to bed, said very decidedly:

"I am all right, and no worse than I was last night in the old deserted stockade on the Yellow Dust trail."

"I will be as good as new as soon as I have had dinner, and in the meanwhile I wish to talk to you, Frank, for I have pledged myself to save human lives now

*Known when in the army as the surgeon scout, and by the Indians as White Beaver, now Mayor of La Crosse, Wis., for the fifth time, and where he is also a practicing physician.

depending upon me, and I have answered for it that you go with me to do so."

Without a moment's hesitation, Frank Powell said, decidedly:

"I will go with you, Bill."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SCOUT'S PROMISE.

Surgeon Frank Powell did not take long to see that Buffalo Bill knew what he was talking about, that his mind was not wandering.

They had been devoted friends for years, had been on many a terrible trail together, had faced many a deadly danger side by side.

Each owed to the other the debt of a life.

Buffalo Bill had left the fort some weeks before on a lone scout, and a dangerous one.

Word had come that a band of desperadoes, unearthed in their crimes, had been spared the rope and driven out of Yellow Dust City, under penalty of death if they sought any other mining camp or settlement within that territory.

It was feared that the band of outlaws would strike some of the settlements, raid them, and then make their escape, and Buffalo Bill had been ordered on the duty of finding the band, warning them of the result if any such act was perpetrated, and to keep watch upon them until they were well out of the country.

As he was known to have gone up into the mountains, near the Indian country, and did not return, great anxiety was felt for his safety from the colonel down.

When the first severe storm of winter came and he did not appear soon after, the gravest fears were felt for him, and Surgeon Powell had volunteered to take the company of scouts and go in search of him.

This the colonel consented to, and the start was to have been made the following morning, when the blizzard came, and that, of course, put their going out of the question.

Surgeon Powell had said he would face the storm, but this Colonel Lennox would not allow, saying that it would result in many deaths instead of one.

Then in the storm Buffalo Bill appeared, and how he had gotten to the fort the oldest frontiersman there could not imagine.

When Buffalo Bill said what he did to Surgeon Powell, the latter saw that he was in earnest.

He knew his pard too well to feel that he had been such a fool as to come to the fort in such a blizzard merely to get there.

He saw that there was a reason, and a good one, and lives depending upon him had made him take the desperate chances of getting there.

"In God's name, how did you do it, Bill?"

"I don't know."

"I do not see how I could have done it, since it was accomplished, but I am here."

"Thank Heaven, you are."

"I killed a horse last night, or rather the blizzard did, and a splendid beast he was."

"I took refuge in the old stockade cabin, and the horse died in sight of it."

"I came from Yellow Dust, and the first night made the Cave Canyon, the next day only a dozen miles, then the stockade cabin, and to-day the fort."

"My noble horse, Giant, died in sight of the fort, poor fellow, and I wish to bury him in the soldiers' graveyard, for he deserves it, as he saved many lives, my own next, and will be instrumental in saving more."

"I tell you, Frank, that I left a band of helpless men, crippled all of them, up in the mountains beyond Death Valley, and they have no food save deer meat and the little I could leave them, and it is about gone now."

"They are sheltered as well as could

be expected, have plenty of wood, and yet a few days more will starve and freeze them out."

"Miners, of course?"

"Frank, let us say so, but to you I will tell the truth."

"Ah!"

"They are the band of outlaws on whose trail I was sent."

"No!"

"It is the truth."

"Then you have more humanity in you, Bill Cody, than half the preachers who preach it, but don't practice it."

"I have a sense of duty."

"Yes, and you have gone beyond it all in aiding a band of men who ought to be hanged."

"Perhaps, but I have given my word that you will return with me to their rescue."

"If you have given your word, I will go, but not to help them alone."

"Oh, yes, you will; for the humane lies as deep in your breast as in that of any man alive."

"I tell you that these men, outlaws we will call them, are on the verge of death, and a frightful, despairing death—"

"I will go, Bill."

"I knew that."

"But these men were hunted by a band of inhuman fiends, who, in hounding them for what they had done, showed themselves even worse than they, for, by treachery, they got them into their power, and then, Surgeon Frank Powell, you will scarcely believe what I tell you, but the devils cut off a hand or a foot of each one of the unfortunate wretches!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TALE OF WOE.

Surgeon Frank Powell sprung to his feet as though Buffalo Bill had struck him. His face paled with indignation at what he heard, and he walked twice across the room before he spoke.

"Buffalo Bill, few men could tell me what you have, and I not say that they lied."

"I believe you, and yet to do so it lowers mankind to a level with the brute creation to do so."

"Can men be so inhuman toward their fellow-beings?"

"They were."

"Who were they?"

"They felt so ashamed of their dastard cruelty that they masked their faces and the outlaws did not know one of them."

"They were far worse than the outlaws."

"Far."

"What reason gave they?"

"To deliver a just punishment."

"My God, have mercy upon such justice."

"That is not all."

"What?"

"I have more to tell."

"To debase human nature still more? But, tell me all."

"They performed their amputations with some skill, and that shows that there were surgeons among the fiends."

"It does."

"In fact, their work, in most cases, from my inexperienced judgment, was well done."

"Strange they did not kill them?"

"No, they wished to have them live and bear worse suffering."

"The tigers!"

"They dressed the wounds, and as soon as the men were able to stand it, they mounted them upon their horses, robbed them of their food, nearly all of their blankets and clothing, and turned them adrift in the mountains to starve and freeze."

"My God!"

"Why, Bill, if I did not know you were in your proper mind I would say this story was the hallucination of a fevered brain."

"It is only too true. I found those men when looking for a shelter from the

second blizzard that came on, for I was in good quarters when the first storm fell."

"I am glad of that."

"I struck a trail, followed it, and found the worst camp I ever gazed upon."

"I don't wonder you say so."

"The poor wretches had built themselves a partial shelter up the canyon, and they had been killing their horses for food."

"Terrible!"

"They seemed to know they were doomed and were but prolonging their misery."

"Of course, they would all have perished had you not found them?"

"Yes, they were nearly dead as it was, and the blizzard would have quickly ended them."

"One poor fellow was dead in their midst."

"He was fortunate."

"You are right."

"But I went to work after I came to a full understanding of the situation and never in my life did I work as I did then."

"You see the blizzard was threatening to break upon us with the coming of night, and I will tell you that a great deal had to be done."

"I do not doubt it, Bill."

"The canyon was fortunately an ideal camping place for shelter from a storm, and I soon had a good shelter built, put the horses in the other one, killed some deer, and we had a good supper, and the men were once more like living beings."

"I'll wager that you brought them back from the brink of Shadow Land, Bill?"

"I did what I could, and we lived through the storm."

"We were comfortable if not happy, and I did all I could to dress their wounds, but had two graves to build while there."

"Too bad!"

"I told them that I would go to the fort, that you would return with me, and see that their wounds were all right, and we would bring blankets, medical stores, and all supplies, so that they could winter there, for I tell you it will be all that well men can do to get there and back in this weather."

"You are right."

"And then you left them?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"This is the sixth day."

"There is no time to lose."

"None."

"Why did you come around by Yellow Dust?"

"I did not intend to do so, but I came upon a camp of lost miners, and they were in very little better condition than the outlaws, save for the latter being crippled."

"They were lost?"

"Completely, and I knew that another blizzard was coming."

"It has come, and you know what it has been, Frank, but if you want more information I can give you pointers on it."

"I am sure of that, Bill."

"Well, I had but little food, but I shared it, then set the band moving, and struck out for Yellow Dust, the nearest point, that night."

"And made it?"

"Early the next morning, and in a blinding storm."

"We lost two men and a number of horses, and yet made it."

"You were fortunate."

Buffalo Bill then went on to tell of his short stop with Sule Ross, the store-keeper of Yellow Dust City, and his starting upon his desperate ride through the blizzard.

Doctor Powell listened with rapt attention to all, and then asked:

"But, Bill, to return to those poor outlaws, could they not give the slightest

clue as to who the men were that treated them thus, for punishment most dire should be visited upon such wretches?"

"No, they could not, or, rather, did not; but I can," was Buffalo Bill's response to the surprise of Surgeon Powell.

CHAPTER XIII.

TO THE RESCUE.

"You know who the perpetrators of that fiendish crime are, Bill?" asked Doctor Powell.

"I know enough to be a clue to track them."

"Good!"

"But it must be a secret, Frank, as is the one about the outlaws, whom we go to rescue."

"Certainly."

"There were twenty-seven men the outlaws said in the band that corralled them."

"Yes."

"There were twenty-seven men in the band I found lost and guided to Yellow Dust City."

"I see."

"From certain remarks made by the outlaws, I learned enough to spot some of the men among the lost miners."

"They were masked when they did their deed, but they were not masked when I found them."

"They had no guide, and got lost in the second storm, and they would have been eternally lost in this last one if I had not found them, for they were out of provisions, as I told you."

"I did not to them refer to the outlaws in any way, but I took them to Yellow Dust and they are safe there when wanted, for they do not suspect they are under suspicion."

"That is well."

"But now to our trip, Bill."

"Yes, and we must get off to-day."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"The storm is over, as you see, and we can go as far as the stockade cabin to-night, and then branch off in the morning, for it is not a mile out of our way."

"You know best, Bill."

"We can be up and ready to start with dawn, and we go through a canyon that I do not believe will be much blocked with snow, and can make a night camp in the foothills, fully thirty miles from the stockade cabin, and the next day I hope to get to the camp."

"The truth is, Frank, we must get there with all speed, let our horses suffer as they may."

"And what force will you take?"

"None."

"No soldiers?"

"Only Surgeon Frank Powell."

"Not one of your scouts?"

"Not one."

"You will see the colonel?"

"Yes, and get from him half a dozen of the best Government mules for pack animals, for they stand the cold well and are good snow breakers, while they live on less than a horse."

"They do, but you will need some grain for them."

"Yes, and our horses."

"I will have one to carry grain alone."

"But I will see the colonel now, as I will have time before dinner, and wish to start the work of preparation."

"It is best."

"But are you all right yourself?"

"Perfectly sound and good as new again," was the answer, and muffling himself up well, Buffalo Bill went to headquarters.

"I welcome you as from the grave, Cody, for we had given you up for lost; but, like a cat, you have nine lives," said Colonel Lennox.

"I may take chances, colonel, but I generally see my way clear before doing so, sir."

"But I have to report that the outlaw band went over into Death Valley."

"Ah! Then that settles them."

"But I found a band of freezing, starving men up in the mountains, sir, and that is why I risked what I did to get to the fort."

"They are doomed then."

"No, sir, I left them as well off as possible, and Surgeon Powell says that he will, with your permission, return with me with supplies, for they cannot be moved."

"It is madness."

"Oh, no, sir, I got through in the storm, and we can go the trail now."

"I will not let a force go, for it would mean death, and you should not risk your scouts' lives."

"No one goes with me, save Surgeon Powell, and we take all risks for humanity's sake."

The colonel remained firm in his refusal for a while, but at last yielded when Surgeon Powell came in and said that the ride could be made and he was anxious to go.

This settled, the colonel gave orders to the commissary, quartermaster, and hospital steward to supply all things needed by the two bold adventurers, and this was done.

Having obtained permission from Colonel Lennox to bury his horse in the graveyard of the fort, Buffalo Bill ordered his scouts to see that it was done, and then went to his dinner.

It was just one o'clock when the two daring men, the surgeon and the scout, mounted their best horses, all ready for their dangerous undertaking.

They had in line seven large, strong mules, carrying pack saddles, well filled with all that the unfortunate men in the mountains would need.

For various reasons best known to himself, Buffalo Bill had kept secret from Colonel Lennox even that those he was going to rescue were the remnant of the outlawed band, and the men in the fort only knew that the chief of scouts had dared the terrors of the storm to go back to the rescue of half-dying men he had found in the mountains.

Loud were the cheers that greeted the two men as they rode out of the fort.

The storm had broken, the sun had come out, and, though bitterly cold, it was not what Buffalo Bill had to face five hours before.

The trail of his horse was visible, and this was taken and followed, the pace being one that would bring them to the stockade cabin before night.

It was a hard ride, but the cabin was reached, the fire still burned, and the surgeon, scout and Buffalo Bill were at least sure of good quarters for themselves and their animals for that night.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STARS OF YELLOW DUST CITY.

A description of scenes leading up to the incidents occurring in the foregoing chapters will the better acquaint the reader with the people of Yellow Dust City and the characters introduced to his notice.

Yellow Dust City was a booming mining camp of the kind that congregated within its environs every sort of human kind to be found upon the far frontier.

There were honest men and thieves, gamblers, idlers, road-agents under cover, hard working men, and men who scorned to work, preferring to live by their wits and upon others.

The mines panned out well, coaches connected the place with other settlements eastward, but it was the end of the Pioneer Trail thus far.

Beyond was an unknown country save to the red man and a few daring scouts.

The dwellers in Yellow Dust were comfortably housed, and miners' cabins were to be found for miles around the centre of population, which was some fifteen hundred souls, and some, I might justly say, were without souls.

Of course, gambling and fighting were the principal amusements, and law and order were at a discount, save the law of might.

There were saloons galore, and each one had its gambling annex.

Several stores, a blacksmith, gunsmith, and a couple of taverns were the centres of attraction.

The store of the place was owned by the ex-soldier Sule Ross, and the tavern was known as the Golden Arms, a pair of small revolvers or gold being the sign over the door, while beneath were the words:

"Touch me, if you dare!"

It was said that a number had gone mining for those little gold revolvers, with a result that they had proven most deadly, though but toys, for "Colonel" Camp, the landlord, knew now to protect his own.

Next to the Golden Arms was a saloon and gambling den combined, and Colonel Camp was the proprietor also.

It was known as—

"The Colonel's Game."

Though the tavern and the saloon were the best in Yellow Dust City, they could not have been much worse, though it was said that the colonel and a few "special guests" lived well and had the best.

Where Cass Camp had secured his title of colonel no one knew. He dressed in a blue army suit, with brass buttons; wore a black slouch hat and gold cord, and the unfortunate man who failed to call him colonel never found favor in his eyes.

If a man behaved badly in the tavern or saloon, the colonel never himself played "bouncer," but called upon some well-known tough to do it, and that meant drinks free for one week at the bar.

It was also said that the colonel paid a man to "lie low" and kill the one who should attempt to steal the gold revolvers.

The man most respected in Yellow Dust City was "Sule Ross, the Store Boss," and "Boss Ross," as he was called, and with whom the reader is already acquainted as the old-time comrade of Buffalo Bill when he was a sergeant in the army.

That the word of Sule Ross went as pure gold all knew, and his undaunted courage, kindness to those who needed aid, and firm hand with the rough ones, were known and acknowledged.

There were other good men and true in Yellow Dust City, and there was a far larger element of an utterly reckless kind that were very dangerous.

What Sule Ross's position was in one way, Colonel Camp's was in another, and each held great influence.

But there were others who also held sway, a particularly successful miner, for instance, and more than all the man who stood at the head of the gambling fraternity.

The latter was a card sharp known as the "Shasta Sport," as well as the "Silver Sport," for he had the peculiarity of wearing a silver cord around his slouch hat, silver buttons upon his jaunty costume, carrying a handsome watch and chain of the same metal, wearing a silver ring representing a coiled snake with diamond head and eyes, and having his belt buckle solid, massive, and beautifully moulded in the same white metal.

His revolvers and bowie were also of silver mounting, and a scarf pin and star of diamonds were set in silver. When in full costume this denizen from Shasta sported full on his shirt front three sunflowers beautifully done in frosted silver and filigree, which, therefore, became the most conspicuous feature of his novel attire.

A singular peculiarity of this gamester was that he would only gamble for gold.

The gold, too, had to be in coin, and if he won, as he generally did, the man that lost had it impressed upon him that he could only pay the man from Shasta in gold money.

This fact had gained for the gambler the added sobriquet of Gold Coin Sam.

This man was the most noted char-

acter in Yellow Dust City, and he had such a following of admirers as made him quite the "king pin" of the camp.

Sam's hand was ever in his pocket for charity, and the other was equally as ready to draw a gun, but never would draw a weapon until needed, and when drawn he used it with almost unerring precision.

But so sure was it that he "needed it" so often during his life in Yellow Dust City that he had become as much feared as he was admired.

When evening came the large shed saloon of "The Colonel's Game" gathered the crowds, and there the Sport from Shasta held reign with the other noted personages of Yellow Dust City, and seldom a night went by without the recording angel having to write down a human soul rushed into eternity from the mining camp known as Yellow Dust City.

It is into "The Colonel's Game," several weeks prior to the opening of this story, I would take my reader and have him witness the scene that led up to Buffalo Bill's starting on the trail of the fugitive band, later known as the Crippled Crew.

CHAPTER XV.

DENOUNCED.

"The Colonel's Game Saloon" was in full blast, and it was crowded to the doors, for word had been circulated around the camps of Yellow Dust City that an important event was to happen.

It was hinted that it was for the good of all honest men, and for the welfare of Yellow Dust City.

All honest and dishonest men, too, had gone there on the night specified, of course.

Notices had been stuck up at the Golden Arms, the colonel's saloon, the store of Sule Ross, and other places, so few, if any, in the miners' camp did not know that something out of the usual run was to take place that night.

The colonel was there, so also was Sule Ross, and the richest miner of Yellow Dust, Carl Waring, was with them, while the man from Shasta, Sunflower Sam, was not far away.

The four named had a serious look, but the crowd looked curious and expectant. What was going to happen all wondered, but few appeared to know.

That he should not be suspected of being dishonest, and not having the welfare of Yellow Dust camps at heart, every miner, hanger-on, and loafer was there.

When all were assembled, Colonel Camp knocked loudly on the bar for order. Silence at once followed and the colonel said:

"Gents, we are gathered here to-night upon a most important mission, and no honest man will object to my closing and locking the doors during the meeting, for we wish not to be disturbed by any one going out or comin in—see?"

All apparently did "see," and there was a feeling of nervousness among many of them.

"I am no speech-maker," continued the colonel, "so I'll leave it to Boss Sule Ross to do the talking, and then all others present here who I will not name to do the acting, if it has to be done."

"Gents, you all know Boss Sule Ross, as square a man as I am myself, and who has the good of these camps at heart, just as I have."

The colonel was applauded for the double compliment he paid to himself and Sule Ross was greeted with a shout that showed his popularity with all.

The doors were closed then, not a man daring to raise his voice against it, and in his frank, free-and-easy manner, Sule Ross said:

"Men, I have not much to say, but it will be to the point. If I tread on any man's toes, I hold myself responsible, for the time has come when the desperado element shall no longer run these camps."

"We are hundreds of men banded together in the midst of this wilderness, and the motive is with most of us to earn an honest living.

"We have left comfortable homes, those who loved us, and have risked our lives in our fight for fortune.

"But there are those who have fastened themselves upon us to rob us of what we work for, and to keep the camps in continual turmoil by their lawless acts and determination to ferment trouble.

"These are the ones I refer to, and I know that the time has come to strike a blow at these vampires and drive them from our midst.

"At a meeting of a dozen of the leading men in these camps, held several weeks ago, there was appointed a secret few as detectives, to ferret out those who have been robbing the miners, holding up the coaches, and cheating honest card players by marked cards, thus winning their money.

"These ferrets set to work, and have traced a great deal of these lawless acts to a band of men we all know, and upon them the doom of exile shall be pronounced, giving them until noon to-morrow to leave Yellow Dust City.

"That we will not allow them to fasten upon other camps, we will send word at once to every mining camp and settlement in this far country, warning them not to allow them to enter their lines.

"Where they go, we care not, but they shall leave Yellow Dust City, and in the time specified, taking all their belongings with them."

A shout of approval was what followed the words of Sule Ross, and eyes were cast upon all sides to see upon whom the ban of exile had fallen.

Suddenly one man arose in the crowd. Every eye was upon him at once. He was a tall, well-formed man, with long hair, and beard, and dressed rather better than those about him.

About his waist he wore a wide blue belt in which he carried his weapons, and altogether he was rather picturesque in appearance.

In a deep voice he said:

"I for one beg to thank Merchant Ross and those who have backed him up in this good work for what has been done, and I can safely say that my immediate comrades, my band of Blue Belts, as you have called us, are ready to hold ourselves prepared to support him, with our lives, if necessary, in driving the desperadoes from this camp."

A cheer greeted these bold words, and then came in the clear voice of the Sport from Shasta:

"Burt Boyd, you and your Blue Belts are those that we have doomed to exile."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DOOM OF THE BLUE BELTS.

A murmur, more like a deep growl of anger than surprise, ran around the large saloon when Sunflower Sam, the man from Shasta, told who it was that the Secret Vigilance Committee had denounced as lawless men and doomed to be driven from Yellow Dust City.

Burt Boyd was known to one and all, as were also the men who were leagued with him and were known as Blue Belts. The band numbered fifteen, and Burt Boyd was their leader.

They had come in a party into Yellow Dust, and had struck upon a gold claim in a canyon two miles from the Golden Arms. It was said by many that the claim was played out, was worthless, but the Blue Belts appeared to think to the contrary, and to find at least some gold there.

They were a reckless lot of fellows, bold in their ways, fearless of consequences, could take their own part, and kept always in company, for seldom was it that less than four men were together.

What they got at the bar of the colonel's saloon they paid for, and when

they took a meal at the Golden Arms down went their money.

They had erected good cabins for themselves; all had the best of horses; they lived well, for their bills at the store of Sule Ross were large, yet always promptly paid.

They were all card players, and were often called "The Men of Luck," for they seldom lost a game. When they did lose, they never flinched, and their money was ready to pay their losses.

Now and then they had been drawn into serious quarrels, but their backing was at hand promptly, and too good to allow them to be downed.

On Sunday they never worked, nor entered a saloon, nor touched a card. They would spend the day in resting, fishing, or hunting.

With all this, they were looked upon with suspicion by many. They had too much money to be honest, it was whispered.

As a band the Blue Belts had too much power, so something was wrong about them, beyond a doubt, concluded many of the denizens of the camp.

Nothing was known of their antecedents, and they never talked of themselves or their past. They were dangerous men, certainly, as a band of fifteen, and it was remarked that not one of them had ever been killed, when other men had fallen under their deadly aim.

Some other whispers went about that several of them had been recognized by miners as having been road-agents on other western trails.

Hence, stories about them had gone the rounds until it at last was said that they were nothing more than a band of outlaws secretly in Yellow Dust City to get what they could.

It was rumored that they played with marked cards, cheated at everything, and of late had been the ones who had so mysteriously robbed the cabins of the miners of hard-earned gold hidden away.

When, therefore, the Shasta Sport said what he did, telling Burt Boyd that he and his Blue Belts were the accused men, those who had heard these ugly rumors against them, had uttered a threatening exclamation that boded no good to them.

Instantly Burt Boyd flashed around upon the Sunflower Sport. His face was white, his eyes burning, and his right hand rested upon a revolver in his blue belt.

About him were his comrades, a dozen in number, for the camp of the Blue Belts was never left without some protection, and two were there.

Each one of the Blue Belts gazed upon their leader, and their demeanor showed that they were there to stand by him.

"Sunflower Sam, who is it that makes this charge against the Blue Belts?" demanded Burt Boyd savagely.

All awaited the answer in deathlike silence.

It came cool and sharp.

"I regret to say that I make it, Burt Boyd, for I will not sail under false colors. I am your accuser."

"You! A man I deemed my friend?"

"I am not one to shrink from duty, Boyd, strike whom my act may. At the meeting of the Secret Vigilantes I was chosen to send men out to spot or hunt down the worst law breakers in Yellow Dust City. Their reports were the same as my own decision, and I made my report in accordance with the facts."

"The Vigilantes acted upon it, and your doom was pronounced. You and your Blue Belt Brigade, as you name the band at your beck and call, are to get out of Yellow Dust by noon to-morrow."

"Suppose we refuse to go?"

"Then another doom than exile will be visited upon you," was the incisive answer.

"What is that?"

"You and each one of your band will be hanged," said the colonel, to whom the Shasta Sport turned for answer to Burt Boyd's question.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WARNING.

The wild yell that followed this announcement of Colonel Camp as to what would be the fate of the Blue Belts if they refused to leave the camps, checked Burt Boyd in what he seemed about to say.

His face was deadly pale, and in glancing at his comrades he saw that they felt their utter powerlessness to stem the tide setting against them.

The whole community seemed to be determined to carry out the work of the Secret Vigilantes, when such men as Colonel Cass Camp, Sule Ross, the man from Shasta, and Miner Waring were the ones who had made the move.

The Blue Belts had been denounced. They were the strongest of the bands in Yellow Dust City. They would be the ones to suffer for the many, the scapegoats for all the hard characters in the mines.

Just what they had been guilty of no one particularly cared, so that some one was to be punished to clear the atmosphere.

The better element present took this view of it, while the toughs took the idea that they must demand the doom of the Blue Belts to cover up their own deeds.

Many desperadoes then and there vowed to lead better lives.

When Burt Boyd and his men heard the fate that was to be theirs if they refused to go, they knew how hopeless they were in that mad crowd to resist. Wisely they did not attempt to do so, and Burt Boyd said:

"We can submit; but, in driving us out of these camps, you, the self-constituted Vigilantes who accuse us of crimes, yourselves commit a crime in robbing us of our claim."

These were bold words, and instantly they were answered by the Shasta Sport, who retorted:

"You shall not say that, Burt Boyd, for I will pay you your price for your mine."

Another yell greeted this. The Sport was always the man to chip in at the right time.

"Their gold claim is said to be worthless," called out the colonel, "and yet you offer to pay their price for it!"

"I mean within reason what three competent judges shall say it is worth."

"How quickly you eat your words, Sunflower Sam," sneered Burt Boyd.

"No, sir, no one shall say that!" came the answer. "I will pay you your price!"

Again the Shasta Sport was cheered.

"If you are good for the sum?"

"Name it!"

"There are men here who claim that it is worthless, but it is not."

"Name your price!"

"If I named its value in reality you could not buy, nor could any other man in Yellow Dust City."

"I ask you to name your price!"

"One hundred thousand dollars."

"That gives me full claim to it?"

"Yes."

"With the signature of each one of you outlawed?"

"Certainly."

"I will pay you."

"When and how?"

"Right here, sir, in United States greenbacks, for you can carry bills for that big amount more readily than you can such a quantity of gold."

"All right; we accept."

"Then I'll draw up the papers."

Pen, ink, and paper were forthcoming, and leaning upon the bar the man from Shasta wrote the transfer.

"Here it is; now sign it?"

Burt Boyd and his men, pale, yet calm, took their position in line, while Sunflower Sam called out:

"Colonel, bring me my satchel from your strong box."

The colonel disappeared through a door back of the bar that led into the Golden Arms, and soon returned bearing

a small satchel cleverly wired over and doubly locked by padlocks and chains.

Opening it with a couple of keys he took from his pocket, the Shasta Sport drew out half a dozen rolls of crisp bills secured by rubber bands.

From one after the other of these he counted out the money until he stopped in the middle of the fourth roll.

"Here is the amount, Boyd; count the bills for yourself, and you see I still have something left." And the Shasta Sport smiled grimly, while the crowd stared.

"Do you want a partner, Sam?" called out Miner Waring.

"No, I always play a lone hand, Waring," was the smiling response.

The bills were carefully counted by Burt Boyd and one of his men, and being mostly in large sums it did not take long.

"Are you satisfied?"

"I am."

"Then, Ross, you had best state the sentence again to the Blue Belts, for if they make a mistake it will be fatal to them."

Sule Ross at once advanced and said:

"I am sorry, Boyd, that this blow falls upon you and your comrades alone in this instance, as we know there are many more who should be punished also."

"But you are an organized band, the strongest in the camps, and we sentence you first, and hope that it will be a warning."

"We give you your lives, and Sunflower Sam has generously paid you for your claim; but to the other law-breakers like yourselves, I wish to say that the Secret Vigilantes are still at work, and the doom that falls upon the next will be death, for to-night they have their warning to break off from their crimes."

Here a roar of approval broke in upon the speaker, but he continued:

"You are sentenced to leave this camp, to seek refuge in no other camp or settlement, and to leave this part of the country never to return under penalty of death."

"To-morrow at noon, with your horses and belongings and what supplies you care to take along, you are to leave."

"Such is your doom, and I trust it will be a warning to you for the future."

Another cheer from the crowd, and then a voice shouted:

"No, they are outlaws, and must meet just punishment."

"Hang them! Hang them all!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

SCALPLOCK SAM.

The eyes of every man in the saloon turned upon the one who had suddenly demanded more dire punishment for the Blue Belts than driving them out of the mining camps.

He had risen in the centre of the crowd and all knew him at a glance.

The thought of many was at once that he was equally a disturbing element in the community with the Blue Belts.

The demand to hang them had fallen with startling surprise upon Burt Boyd and his men.

They had at once huddled together like sheep toward one corner of the bar.

No one knew better than they the fickleness of a crowd in a mining camp.

They could be readily swayed to reverse their decision and decide that death alone should be their punishment. They drew together for self preservation, to defend their lives as best they could.

The man who demanded their lives was by far the most deserving of the name of desperado of any one in the mines. He was born bad, and grew worse with increasing years.

He had boasted of his bad record where he had come from, had openly, when drinking, said that there was a price on his head, and dared men to try and win it.

Bold, fearless, desperate, a card sharp of the worst kind, strong as an ox, quick as a cat, and a deadly hand with re-

volver and knife, he had run amuck at times and found no one to attempt to check his career. To attempt and fail was sure death.

He had been wounded badly by two men, both of whom he had killed, then treated the crowd, and finished his game of cards, winning it, too, before he sought the aid of "Old Rhubarb," the one doctor in Yellow Dust City, and who was making more money than any one miner, it was said, by keeping the people from any other disease save the "bullet fever," a more common illness in the camps throughout Nevada, and frequently proving to be an epidemic.

"Scalplock Sam" was the name that this daring desperado was known by, he having honestly won the unenviable name from the fact that though he did not actually take the scalp of an enemy, he always did cut off a lock of his victim's hair.

"Jist to keep him in remembrance," as he was wont to say.

Like an Indian, he was proud to show these locks of hair, having carefully plaited each one, tied them all together with a red ribbon, and wore them as an ornament swinging to his belt.

Four-fifths of the people in Yellow Dust wanted Scalplock Sam dead, but no one cared to undertake to kill him.

He had a following, too. They were few in number, but they also were bold, bad men of the same stripe as their leader, and the quintette made a full hand that no one cared to play against.

When seated idly in the saloon, at times Scalplock Sam's amusement seemed to be in counting over the locks of hair swinging to his belt, and in this way he had been careful to allow lookers-on to count them.

In this way it was reported that Scalplock Sam had killed fifteen men, or at least wore that many locks of hair.

When, therefore, this bad man arose in the crowd and shouted for the death of the band of Blue Belts, men drew their breaths with suppressed excitement, for they knew that the trouble was not over, but just about to begin.

The Blue Belts knew their man and hope of escape faded from their hearts, for well they realized his desperate character, and that he had equally as desperate a following.

Many saw the motive. Scalplock was playing a bold game. His purpose was to stand well in the community.

If he could lead a deadly crusade against the Blue Belts, he would use it as a cloak to hide his own crimes.

Would he carry the crowd with him? was the question in many minds.

Certainly he had made a bold play for popularity and favor, and was going to ally himself upon the side of law and order.

He was going to chip in with the Secret Vigilantes, and thus be on the same side himself.

So it was he had risen and shouted:

"Hang them all!"

His followers, the four known to be his immediate pards, promptly arose with him and echoed in chorus:

"Hang the Blue Belts!"

This brought other men to their feet with the same cry.

Scalplock had set the fatal ball rolling, and it gathered in size as it went along; but suddenly there came a check.

A voice rang through the saloon, and it was the Sport from Shasta who spoke:

"I say no!" he shouted in no mistaken tones.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SHASTA SPORT'S STAND-OFF.

The stand taken by the other Sam—Sunflower Sam—turned every eye upon him.

He did not flinch under the gaze, but boldly met the scrutiny of the crowd.

A silence followed his words, broken then by the call of Scalplock Sam:

"Who says no?"

Trouble was brewing, all knew. The

situation was getting more critical all around.

The Blue Belts held their position, huddled together, and there was no doubt but that they intended to fight it out, and not tamely submit to the determination of Scalplock Sam to hang them.

The desperado and the Shasta Sport, through some strange accident, had never yet been pitted against each other. They had once played cards, big money was staked, and the Sam from Shasta had won.

After that Scalplock Sam had left him severely alone—discovering that where he could manipulate the cards with skill, the other Sam could do so with even more skill.

Now Scalplock had taken a stand against the Blue Belts, and a glance showed that he had a very considerable following in the crowd.

Many had suffered both from petty and large robberies, and so to visit upon them no other punishment save exile from the mining country they did not believe sufficient.

They should hang, and Scalplock Sam had voiced their thoughts.

When the reply of the Shasta Sport was heard, all eyes turned upon the rival Sam.

He saw his chance, pushed his way toward the sport, and when within twenty feet of him halted.

His four followers had crowded close behind him.

"See here, Sunflower, you no doubt means well, but you is away off, and we says them Blue Belts has been the terror of these camps; they has robbed us, cheated at cards, and done lots of things better men has been hanged for."

"One or two men might have been hanged, Scalplock, but not fifteen—a number that would cause the Government to put a fort right here in Yellow Dust, mighty quick!"

This response of the Sunflower Sport caused a sensation. A fort was the last thing the miners wanted to keep them from law-breaking.

But, nothing daunted, Scalplock replied.

"We can take care of ourselves without the aid of the United States, and I tell you these men must hang, or they will be turned loose to become outlaws and cause more trouble on the trails than there is now."

"Well, we are determined to purify these camps, we of the Secret Vigilantes, and we have decided what should be done with these men, and that settles it."

"I says it don't! and you hain't ther boss here."

"The best men in these camps are with me."

"Hang them men and I'll be with you."

"Thanks—for nothing. I don't ask or need your aid."

"Then I'll act on my own account."

"What will you do?"

"Hang them Blue Belts."

"I'm afraid you are going to bite off more than you can conveniently chew. The Secret Vigilantes have sentenced the Blue Belts, and they will see that they are not dealt with contrary to their wishes."

"See here, Shasta, you talk like a fool."

Matters were drawing to a climax, as all saw, so a lane was slowly opening between the desperado and the Sunflower Sport.

Those who had intended to back up Scalplock now fell aside, for they did not like the Shasta Sport's reference to the soldiers coming into their midst. Many there wished to keep well out of sight of the officers of the law and of the army.

The four comrades of Scalplock still stood near him, though they had wisely stepped two on each side, not to be in the way to stop bullets should revolvers be suddenly drawn.

Scalplock, accordingly, stood alone in

the centre of a lane eight feet wide, rough-clad men being the barrier upon either side.

The Blue Belts had gathered close to the Sport from Shasta.

There was no backdown in them, for their lives were at stake.

The colonel, Sule Ross, Carl Waring, and other were close at hand, and watched.

In answer to the last words of Scalplock, the Shasta Sport smiled and replied:

"You will be the fool, Scalplock, if you raise a hand to hang these men, for I'll shoot you dead in your tracks at the first move you make against them."

"Now, go ahead!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE CLIMAX.

"Do you mean that as a challenge, Sunflower?" roared the other Sam.

"I mean it as a warning," was the quiet response.

"It's well you don't mean to challenge me."

"Take it as you choose, Samuel," returned the Shasta Sport.

The crowd was silent as though already at a funeral, and no one could understand Scalplock's delay in acting. He appeared to be fencing for time or position, it was apparent.

The Shasta Sport still leaned carelessly upon the bar, but his hand dropped very near the butt of the nearest revolver to his grasp.

Scalplock looked about him. He saw his four comrades, but he wished to get a look at the crowd.

Would they back him up? was what he wished to decide.

After a quick scrutiny he knew that he must play a lone hand—that the law and order men were in the majority.

He could not back down, however. Something must be done, and quickly; so he made the venture:

"See here, Shasta, there hain't no quarrel between you and me, but it's the Blue Belts I wants ter see downed, for I'm on the side of justice."

The Sport laughed, and a hum went through the crowd.

Was the man whom others feared showing the white feather?

Had Scalplock decided to back down when the other was his adversary?

Before the desperado could go on to state his case, Burt Boyd spoke up quickly:

"Sunflower, I thank you for your stand in our favor, but we do not wish you to get into trouble on our account, so I am willing to meet Scalplock right here and now in a fight with any weapons he may select, and that will settle it."

A yell of approval greeted this offer.

The leader of the Blue Belts showed clear grit, whatever his crimes might be.

The Sport turned to him and replied:

"I appreciate your offer, but decline it, Burt Boyd, for if I cannot, as one of the Secret Vigilantes, protect a condemned man then we are weak, indeed, as a law and order committee."

Another shout greeted this stand of the man from Shasta, for all saw the force of his position.

But Scalplock broke in with:

"That's what I'll do, Burt Boyd. I'll fight you, for—"

"You'll do no such thing! You will fight me if you fight at all, or you will back down like the coward I believe you to be, Scalplock!"

There was no mistaking the Sport's words, and he had suddenly faced the desperado, revolver in hand.

Scalplock was cowed; but if he showed the white feather now, Yellow Dust City would be quickly made too hot for him.

Glancing at his four pards, then came his answer:

"I'll fight you, then, Sunflower, if it is to be a square fight, and no trickery."

"What do you mean?"

"These people all seem to be your friends, not mine."

"Those who are honest men and on the side of right are my friends, but those who wish to have Yellow Dust City continue to be a disgrace and human slaughter pen will side with you, Scalplock, and I am willing, if it must be, for the test to come between the law and order men and the law-breakers, right now and here."

Again a cheer, and a look over the crowd showed that no one was anxious to be among the law-breakers.

"Come, let this be settled now, Scalplock, or back down, for the Shasta Sport is not the man to go back on his word," the colonel chipped in.

This chimed in with the humor of the crowd, and Scalplock saw it.

Instantly he sprung a surprise upon all, even his four pards, for he said:

"I yield, pards, for if I insist upon a fight with Sunflower, I place myself among the law-breakers, and we give a black eye to the very cause good men wish to uphold. The Secret Vigilantes rule here and I yield."

He stepped forward and held forth his hand, which the Shasta Sport promptly grasped, at the same time glancing over the crowd and saying:

"Don't crowd him, pards, because he acknowledged he was wrong, or there may be trouble ahead for those who do."

"Come, gentlemen, and take something with me."

The ready invitation was an inspiration, for it checked all grumbling of the dissatisfied at not having seen a man killed.

"You will join us?" and the Shasta Sport turned to Burt Boyd, who answered:

"You proved our friend in time of need. We will drink health and prosperity to you, Sunflower Sam."

CHAPTER XXI.

TO THE DEATH VALLEY.

The Blue Belts dashed off their drinks with their eyes upon the Shasta Sport.

They seemed to regard him alone as their only friend.

Without a look or word to others they filed out of the saloon, followed by a burst of applause at their departure, which they could not mistake for aught else than delight at their going.

Once outside, they moved at quick pace to the store of Sule Ross, for they were anxious to make their purchases necessary for their needs in their forced exile.

Provisions in quantity, blankets, small tents, and all else that could be of service were bought and paid for, along with half a dozen horses, to carry their outfit.

These things were packed, and the animals were led to the cabin home of the Blue Belts.

Their claim was in a little valley, near its head. They had there three cabins, one being in the centre, and used for kitchen, dining, and lounging room, the other two for sleeping rooms.

They had a score of good horses. These were brought up, saddled, and the extra ones also used as pack animals.

At midnight they were all ready for their departure.

Mounting, they rode away in the gloom of night, Burt Boyd at their head.

No one they could see was visible to note their departure, and yet, crouching by the side of the trail, was a spy observing their every movement.

As they filed by him and passed out of sight, this shadower arose, and, shaking his fist after them, said aloud:

"Go on, Blue Belts, into outlaw life; but you go to your doom, for slip away as you do, like thieves in the night, you will be followed and tracked to a doom that death were preferable to."

The man drew back out of sight, and the Blue Belts rode on.

Coming to where several trails branched off, Burt Boyd drew rein. All then halted, but not a word was uttered.

The leader seemed at a loss which trail to take.

After some moments of silence the man behind him spoke:

"Which trail will it be, captain?"

"I do not know," was the low reply.

"You have not decided where to go, then, sir?"

"No; it was all so sudden, you know; I have not had time to think."

"The right goes to the fort, you know?"

"Yes, but we do not wish to go there."

"The left is the stage trail eastward."

"Yes; but that way we do not go."

"And the centre trail leads over the range to the Indian country."

"Yes, but we are not renegades."

"And it also leads up into the Death Valley Mountains."

"Pards, that is our trail!" then announced Burt Boyd.

"To the Death Valley, sir?" repeated several voices, in unison.

"Yes; we will go there, for no one dare follow us there, and we can have time to think and to act."

"But, it is death, they say, for any human being to go there, Captain Boyd!" urged one.

"It is sure death for any of this band to remain where we are."

"True," and all seemed to assent.

"It is sure death for us to go to any other mining camp."

"Very true," they had to admit.

"We dare not seek a settlement anywhere in this country."

"No, not in this whole region."

"Many in Yellow Dust City think they have driven us into outlawry. That remains for them to find out."

"They will find out to their cost some day," uttered a determined voice.

"Yes, and to have time to think, to act, we will go to Death Valley, for wood, water, and grass are plentiful there; and even should the winter catch us there, we can stand it, I am sure."

"To Death Valley it is, then," acquiesced one.

Others chimed in also, and thus supported, Burt Boyd took the centre trail and once more led the way through the darkness.

On, on, they went, fearing no pursuit, and yet upon their track had started, the next night, a merciless band of twenty-seven men—men who had gone on the trail with masked faces and bent upon driving the band of Blue Belts to their doom.

What they drove them to has been seen, when Buffalo Bill found the remnant of the Blue Belt Brigade on the verge of death, crippled and in despair.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RIDE OF RESCUE.

Buffalo Bill and Doctor Frank Powell had risked their lives in a good cause.

The Chief of Scouts had found the outlaws in their last extremity of despair, of suffering, and what he had done for them has been seen.

That they were outlaws had nothing to do with the case.

They were human beings, and he had not hesitated to risk his life to save them.

When he had guided the other party into Yellow Dust City, saving them also, he had learned all about the outlaws whose rescue he was attempting.

He had learned why they had been exiled, and why they had been.

Also he knew that they had been followed by twenty-seven men, masked and determined upon their destruction wholly.

The cruelty visited upon the Blue Belts had won the full sympathy of the scout for them, and he had promised to save them and see that their malignant foes were brought to justice, for by crippling them, robbing them, taking from them their supplies, blankets, and clothing, they had shown that their intention was to make them suffer first, then perish by combined cold and hunger.

These persecutors of the Blue Belts Buffalo Bill was determined to ferret out.

When he knew all of them he would be ready to strike his blow.

Two had perished in sight of the camps, it will be remembered; others might die from the effects of their hard trip, but those who survived could and should be found out, one and all.

Thus had Buffalo Bill reasoned, and he had kept his own counsel, save what he said to Sule Ross, the storekeeper at Yellow Dust City, and Surgeon Frank Powell.

To the latter he told all that there was to tell, his surmises and intentions, and was glad to know his opinions, for the surgeon's level head very seldom led him astray.

With Frank Powell, a skilled surgeon, a scout as well, ample medical supplies, plenty of provisions, warm clothing and blankets, Buffalo Bill knew that the outlaws, if they survived his return, would have all they needed to bring them back to health and strength once more.

That he would be unable to reach the camp he did not allow himself to consider for an instant.

After what he had passed through with alone, he knew he could stand more suffering and obstacles in his way with Surgeon Powell as his pard.

They reached the stockade cabin in good time, put their horses in one of the rooms, and gave them a good feed, raked the still smouldering coals together, and soon had a good fire, and, as the surgeon remarked, were as comfortable as they could wish to be.

A fine deer was shot near the cabin, so venison steak was had for supper, and some choice morsels cut to carry along.

The wolves howled outside, angry at being driven from their shelter, but that did not disturb the sleep of the two comrades.

Up before dawn, the horses were fed, breakfast gotten, and with the first glimmer of light they were in the saddles and on their hard trail.

And a hard trail it was, in places almost impassable, where the snow and ice blocked their way.

A halt was made for a good rest at noon, then once more onward, for they had a destination to reach by night, if they expected to shelter themselves and their horses from the bitter cold.

It was reached while the daylight yet remained, a thicket of pines up a canyon.

The snow had not driven in among the pines, so the pine straw was plentiful for the animals and their own bed.

Boughs were cut as a break to the wind for man and beast, a roaring fire was built, and what comfort could be gotten out of a hot supper was had.

But the cold was intense, and both men realized that away from the shelter thicket both their horses and themselves would suffer terribly.

Up again at dawn and once more on their way, Buffalo Bill guiding unerringly though many obstacles turned them out of their way.

No camping at noon, for the scout knew that a few miles more would bring them to the outlaws' camp, and there certainly was rest and shelter whatever they might find there.

That Buffalo Bill had his misgivings of finding them alive, Surgeon Powell plainly saw.

On, on, they went, the horses very tired now with the hard fight, until at last Buffalo Bill called out:

"Frank, there is the camp!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DESPAIRING BAND.

Burt Boyd and his comrades saw Buffalo Bill leave them as men might bid farewell to a dying friend.

He had found them in their despair and suffering, and had indeed proved a good Samaritan.

They had been in that condition of

suffering and mental anguish when every hope had faded from them.

They were helpless, hopeless, and almost indifferent to the fate that faced them, so cruel and relentless had their own kind shown themselves to be to them.

But Buffalo Bill had come among them like a ray of sunshine. His cheery manner had done much for them.

Then his hot coffee, food, and the way he had built them a shelter had been a new lease on life to them.

It was true that they had to huddle together like wild beasts to keep from freezing, and yet it saved them.

The scout Samaritan had dressed their wounds, had buried their dead comrades, had made their shelter secure from the penetrating winds.

He had cut a hole in the ice which they could keep open and thus get water.

More, he had made rude but serviceable crutches for the men who had lost a leg.

Piling wood up he had cut in plenty, he had then given them nearly all the provisions he had, left with them half his blankets, and then told them he would save them.

With this pledge ringing in their ears, he had left them.

Would he return? Dare he attempt it, even though he reached the fort?

Would he ever reach the fort? Could even Buffalo Bill win in such a bitter fight against Nature?

Such were the questions the poor cripples asked each other.

Was it a wonder that they saw him depart with the despairing dread that he would never return?

Their faces grew dark with dread as they saw him go forth in the early morn.

As best they could later they had their scant breakfast, for they well knew that they must prepare against delays.

A half tincup of coffee, a cracker, slice of bacon, and a piece of venison was all, in limited quantity.

Those who were able did what they could to still strengthen their shelter and make it more snug.

They got in a supply of pine straw, and in every way they could prepared for the worst.

Their wounded limbs told them that the worst was coming.

They knew that a bitter storm was brewing.

Forgetful of their own misery they thought of Buffalo Bill.

Would he not be caught in the blizzard and perish?

The day wore away, night came, and they were not as uncomfortable as they had feared.

The next day the skies looked threatening. The little more they could do was done to still make their retreat more secure.

They decided to eat but two meals a day, morning and evening, for their supplies looked scant, indeed. Still they were improving, save two of them, whose maimed limbs gave them pain and anxiety.

Their shelter, the food they had, their comparative comfort, and the inspiration of hope made them feel better.

With the night came the storm, which soon became a blizzard infernal. It shook their shanty, yet the snow stopped up every crack and made it warmer within.

It was an awful night, and they slept but little. They did not dare make a blazing fire for fear of being burned out.

Day came and still the blizzard raged.

Another night of suffering and dread!

Another day of anguish of mind!

"Buffalo Bill is dead, pards, and we are doomed," opined Walt Webster, one of the men most hopeful before.

"Do not talk that way, Webster, for it simply drives hope away. I, for one, have hope in Buffalo Bill," responded Burt Boyd.

"As I have; but do you think mortal man can be out in this blizzard and live, Captain Boyd?"

"Buffalo Bill may have reached the fort, or, so long the blizzard was going to catch him, have gone to Yellow Dust and secured help."

"Help in Yellow Dust City for us? Why, they would come out and shoot us as we are," said another man bitterly.

"Not if Buffalo Bill was along."

"See here, captain, you have more faith in what that man can do than falls to human beings to be able to accomplish."

"I have known him for years, and I know that he has done that the bravest men shrink from."

"No, pards, if Buffalo Bill lives he will keep his pledges and come back to us," confidently asserted Burt Boyd.

"If he lives," disconsolately echoed several voices.

Another night, another day, and the storm still continued!

There was no disguising now that one of their comrades was raving in the delirium of a high fever. His pleading to be taken home touched every heart, But nothing could be done for him.

The blizzard at last came to an end, but the sunshine gave them little hope.

Another day and night, and yet another.

Their supplies were gone, and despair rested upon every face. Even Boyd looked hopeless, dreading night to come on.

"Ho, pards, I am back again!"

It was Buffalo Bill's voice without!

He had kept his pledge to the outlawed band!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DYING OUTLAW'S PRAYER.

Words could never express what those despairing men felt in that snowbound shanty, when they heard the voice of the scout outside, telling them that he had returned, that he had kept his word in the face of obstacles they had believed impossible.

They were seated in sullen silence looking into the fire, each man busy with his own thoughts.

They were hungry, and cold, for their blood was thinned by their wounds, suffering, and scant provisions.

The fire burned brightly, yet did not warm the blood in their chilled veins.

The ravings of their comrade in delirium they hardly heard.

They had grown used to that.

Buffalo Bill and Frank Powell had ridden close up to the shanty unheard.

The afternoon was half gone, and the night only several hours away.

But the two brave men had made the desperate ride, had reached the goal.

Their horses were well worn and glad of the shelter they had reached.

Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell had at first believed all were dead.

Then the ravings of the fevered sufferer were heard, and the scout spoke:

"My God!" was what they heard within. The boughs and blanket that formed the entrance were pushed aside and the white face of Burt Boyd peered out.

He could scarcely believe his ears; he must have proof with his eyes that Buffalo Bill was there!

"Ho, pard, I am back again, and Surgeon Frank Powell is with me, while we have supplies in abundance."

"How fares it with you all?"

"A moment ago we were on the verge of death. Now we are saved, saved, and once more by you, Buffalo Bill!"

"Come, men, do you not hear me talking to Buffalo Bill? It is no dream, no dream, no, but the truth—"

Buffalo Bill held up his hand and Burt Boyd stopped suddenly.

The scout removed his hat, Surgeon Powell did the same, and in silence they sat upon their horses and listened.

The silence within the shanty was broken by a voice. It was not the ravings of the dying man.

But, be it what it was, his voice was raised in prayer!

The voice of the scout had silenced

his ravings, he had heard it, and it had brought him out of the land of delirium and he was praying!

"Too late, oh, God, too late to save my soul from flight into the Shadow Land beyond the grave, but Thy Hand has guided thy servant, Buffalo Bill, amid all dangers, back into the wilderness, where we have suffered and despaired, and his act will save my dear comrades from death."

"Oh, God, bless and care for those so dear to me far from here, and keep in Thy protection my comrades who kneel by my side while I thank Thee and supplicate Thee for continued mercy—"

The voice faded away; the prayer ended, and a fervent amen came from within the shanty.

Then a dead silence. It was the silence eternal of the lips that had prayed, while for a fleeting moment back to the burning brain had come consciousness and a full knowledge that the noble scout had done his work well.

Dismounting from their horses, Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell had followed Burt Boyd into the shanty.

The picture was a strange one.

The men were crouched about their dead comrade.

It was too sad a scene for the living, Buffalo Bill knew, and he said cheerily:

"He is out of all suffering, comrades; he has solved the mystery of life and of death; so he needs not our sympathy."

"You are the ones to need aid, and Surgeon Powell is here with me, so cheer up, all of you."

The men gave a faint cheer, but obeyed the scout and went out into the sunshine.

"Here, get some coffee made first, for I will build a fire outside, and then we will soon have things in shape in your cabin."

"You can open the packs and help us, for there is much to be done before night, but Surgeon Powell and I will do the hard work."

The fire outside was soon made, the coffee pot was put on, the horses and mules were unsaddled, and the packs opened.

The old straw in the shanty was thrown out, all within was put in good order, and bear and buffalo robes, blankets and canvas curtains around the walls made the cabin as comfortable as could be desired.

The shanty for the cattle was then strengthened, improved, and they were put in it and fed well after their hard journey.

Next the burial of the dead man followed, and all stood uncovered about the grave, while the body was consigned to its last home.

"Now, pards, night is upon us, and we'll have a supper such as you have not had for many a long day, and Surgeon Powell will look to your wounds later, so that you will have a good night's rest."

"Remember, we have plenty of supplies, so let nothing disturb your minds, and here you can winter, and be all right when the spring comes, save that you have each one lost a limb," said Buffalo Bill, cheerfully.

"And each one has a wrong to right, Buffalo Bill," impressively said Burt Boyd, and as fervently as they had uttered it to their dying comrade's prayer each man now said to this:

"Amen!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PICKING UP CLUES.

The sufferings of the Blue Belts were forgotten in the broad glare of the blazing fire of logs, with a good supper, warm clothing, plenty of blankets, and a well-filled larder.

The presence of Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell was like a glass of wine to them, and they bore their sufferings now most cheerfully.

The Surgeon Scout, with Buffalo Bill as his assistant, set to work to look at the stumps of the severed limbs.

Of course, with the cold and enforced neglect, the wounds were inflamed and in bad condition.

One poor fellow was told that he must have another amputation—that his arm must be cut off further up—to save his life.

He submitted without a word, took the chloroform the surgeon gave him, and the amputation was skillfully and quickly done.

With all that was necessary to dress the wounds, Surgeon Powell soon had each man comfortable, and expressed his surprise that they were not in a worse condition.

"You say that you do not know who did this cruel work?" he asked Burt Boyd.

"No, sir. Each man of them was masked most thoroughly."

"It is the work of a surgeon, and a skillful one, though he took no pains."

"A surgeon, sir?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"But there are no surgeons in Yellow Dust."

"There is the old doctor, captain," suggested Walt Webster.

"True, Old Rhubarb they call him."

"I know of him; but he is half a quack and could never do work as neatly as this was done."

"There is no other, sir, in Yellow Dust."

"There is, certainly, though he may not have made himself known," was Surgeon Powell's determined reply, and it set the men to thinking.

"I know of no one save Old Rhubarb," added Buffalo Bill; "but, then, I have often met able physicians on the frontier as miners, teamsters, scouts, and soldiers. Something has gone wrong with them where they lived, and they have come out here."

"Yes, Cody, many a brilliant professional man has wrecked his life by some deed and been driven into a new career," Surgeon Powell said.

Then he asked:

"Could you not recognize one of the men who were in that band?"

"Not to swear to his actual identity, Doctor Powell."

"Did you notice whether the surgeon who amputated your limbs wore a ring?"

"By Jove, but he did!" cried several of the men, in a breath.

"What kind of a ring was it?"

"A ring of massive gold, with a ruby in it of large size."

"Who was the leader of the band?"

"The surgeon appeared to be."

"Ah! that is a good clue, and the ring is another," avowed Buffalo Bill.

Then Surgeon Powell asked:

"Did the surgeon administer chloroform to you?"

"No, sir, he gave us nothing to deaden our pain. There seemed to be pleasure to him in our sufferings."

"Who assisted him, Boyd?"

"He had two assistants, sir, one who seemed to know what to do, but the other was a novice at the work, and several times I noticed that he shuddered when the surgeon cut into the flesh."

"But the man with the knife and saw held a hand as firm as a rock," Walt Webb asserted.

"There was no reason given you for their inhuman work?"

"Yes, doctor, there was. The surgeon said that we were doomed to suffer and die for our crimes."

"That we were given a chance for life, one in a hundred, for we were to be allowed to go our way, though with scant food and covering, and if we survived we were plucky, lucky, and tough, but the chances were that the coyotes would feed on us and in the spring our well-picked bones would be found. We would be recognized as the Blue Belts, and our doom thus would be known."

"He certainly was a most inhuman wretch, and his motive to punish you so severely must have been from some wrong he had suffered at your hands," remarked Surgeon Powell.

"Did none of his men raise a word against his act?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Not one, sir, that any of us were aware of?"

"You were fifteen in number?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now you are seven?"

"Yes, Mr. Cody."

"Eight of us have gone under," was the sad reply.

"Well, we will talk it all over to-morrow, again, and see if we cannot happen upon other clues, for I shall go from here to Yellow Dust City."

"And to-morrow I will have something to tell you all, and we can compare notes," said Buffalo Bill, and soon after all had turned in for the night.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SECRET TO TELL.

New life had been infused into the band of Blue Belts by the coming of Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, the supply of food, and the warm clothing they had received.

The dressing of their wounds, and the hope that was now before them, inspired the sufferers so that they appeared like different men the next morning.

"This cabin is all very well, pards, for a makeshift, but not for a winter abode."

"It will be the very place for the horses, but not for you."

"I can swing an axe pretty well, and we'll set to work upon a cabin at once," said Buffalo Bill.

Good trees were selected and quickly felled by the scout, his way of "swinging an axe pretty well," as he had expressed it, winning the admiration of all.

The men who had been left their legs intact among the Blue Belts dragged the logs to the side of the cliff, where Surgeon Powell was busy building a chimney of rocks.

By noon the chimney was finished, enough logs had been cut for the cabin, and all was going rapidly, the men who had their arms, but were minus a leg, making rude tables and benches.

In the afternoon the cabin was put up, save the roof.

The next day the chinks between the logs were closed with clay, small saplings formed the roof, foundation, and then pine straw thatched it thoroughly against leading.

A shelter of the same kind was made in front, to sit under, bunks were put up inside, the table and benches followed, and then the making and swinging of two windows and the door, on leather hinges, cut from an old saddle, occupied the third day.

The door and windows were in front, made of plaited boughs, and upon the outside pine straw was fastened so as to make them close and secure.

The fireplace was large, occupying nearly one end of the cabin, and all the wood cut was piled up outside close at hand.

"The pine balsam in the walls and roof will benefit you men, and your house is snug, clean, and comfortable, so keep it so, for upon that depends your health," said Surgeon Powell.

The old shanty back of the cabin was to be used for the few horses left to the Blue Belts, for Buffalo Bill intended taking the pack mules back with him, as there would be little corn left if they remained long, and this was to be fed to the horses that remained only when they could get no grass in the canyon.

As the snow melted quickly, and grass grew luxuriously in sheltered places, it was not thought that the horses would suffer very much.

With the end of the fourth day, the work had all been done, the men had moved into their new quarters, and they certainly looked very cheerful and comfortable in contrast with their last shanty home.

Tired at night and retiring early, little

had been talked of among the men, but now that all was ready and the scout and the surgeon had spoken of starting upon their return the next day, Buffalo Bill said:

"It was my intention, Mr. Boyd, to go to Yellow Dust from here, but I shall return with Surgeon Powell to the fort.

"We cannot leave to-morrow, for I saw signs of a second storm coming on, and I do not care to face another blizzard in the saddle.

"We will go as soon as it is over, to the fort, and then I shall visit Yellow Dust City shortly afterward.

"It will be a couple of months before you will need supplies again, but I will be here with them on time, or to guide you all to the fort, if you are able to go, and that I think would be best."

"As I do," added Surgeon Powell.

Captain Boyd and his men had listened with deep attention to what the scout had to say, but at the last remark about going to the fort, he looked at his men in a curious way, and replied:

"We will be well enough, sir, beyond a doubt, for, with the kind care of Surgeon Powell we all feel like new men.

"You, sir, have saved our lives, and we wish to be guided wholly by you.

"But you know we are exiles, outcasts, yes, outlawed, and we would go to the fort under a deep shadow of crime.

"What our past has been I do not now care to discuss, but I wish to say this—that we would like to remain here until the spring.

"Then we will be wholly well and able to act, and it is our intention to act, a crippled crew though we are, that we'll make ourselves felt.

"We all have a wrong to avenge, a cruel wrong, but, outside of that, we have another duty to perform, and we have vowed to do it.

"The twenty-seven men who dogged us to our doom, a worse doom but for you, must each one be found or accounted for.

"The truth is, Mr. Cody, we cannot speak now as we would, but when you return in two months, as you promise, we will be ready to talk, to make known to you, sir, and to Surgeon Powell, a secret, but to no one else."

The words and manner of Burt Boyd were impressive. Both Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell felt this and the former said:

"All right, Boyd, I leave it to you what to tell, and what not. You may have been guilty of many crimes in Yellow Dust, but you have been most cruelly punished for your deeds.

"I bear no ill will against you, and I frankly tell you I shall do all I can to protect you from further persecution, and Surgeon Powell will aid me.

"Tell the secret you refer to in your own way and time, but now let me tell you what I promised to do the night of our coming here."

CHAPTER XXVII.

PLEDGES TO AVENGE.

"I told you, pards, that I led a party of freezing men into Yellow Dust City after leaving you," said Buffalo Bill.

All nodded.

"I started for the fort and could have reached there before the storm became too severe, but I looked for a camp for supper and a short rest, and came upon this party of whom you speak."

"Men out of Yellow Dust, sir?"

"Yes, Boyd; they said they had been out prospecting."

"I wonder if they had not been out prospecting for us, to see that we went to no other camp, or did not halt near Yellow Dust?"

"Boyd, there were just twenty-seven of them."

"My God! Can they have been the band that crippled us?"

"That was their number."

"But they would have returned before the time you met them, sir."

"You had a slight snow storm soon after they left you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Might they not have gotten lost?"

"Would not one man in twenty-seven have been able to find Yellow Dust again?"

"Not unless thoroughly acquainted with the country."

"The snow changes the whole aspect of the land, you know."

"Yes, but that was some weeks ago."

"And you had another storm, you remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"That would have made it still worse for them."

"True, sir."

"Did you observe that your foes had large supplies along?"

"Not much, I should say. They had no pack animals."

"These men I found were lost and out of food."

"Were they masked?"

"They were not."

"They would hardly be, when they expected no one to see them."

"But they had on masks. Several of the men riding in the rear put masks on to protect their faces from the biting cold."

"That settles it, sir."

"I pretended not to notice the masks."

"And you guided them to Yellow Dust, Mr. Cody?"

"Yes, twenty-five of them, for two perished with the cold before we reached there."

"You found out who they were, then?"

"I did not stop at the Golden Arms, where they all went, but rode to Sule Ross's cabin and got some supplies before going on."

"You took chances to go on."

"I knew where I could halt in Cave Canyon for the night and be that far on my way, for, after meeting those men, I dared not go out of Yellow Dust with supplies, as I at first thought of doing, not to have you wait so long."

"I made the ride to the fort all right, though but for these shelters on the way I would never have gotten there, and I killed my two horses in doing so."

"No other man would have gone through," said Boyd, earnestly.

"Well, few are as tough as I am, and can stand as much cold."

"But to those men?"

"Well, sir?"

"I took particular pains to jot down each face in my memory."

"Ah!"

"Of course, they were all muffled up, head and ears, so I could not tell the color of their hair, even."

"But I noted their eyes and what distinguishing marks I could, their voices and horses, and I am sure I could pick a fourth of them out without trouble."

"The others I will have to make sure of in some other way."

"Do you intend to try to find them out, sir?"

"I intend to spot each and every man."

"If they drove you out as outlaws, they must be hunted down as wholesale murderers, for they have caused the death of over half your band."

"They did not fight you openly, manfully, but sought, Indian like, to murder you by the most cruel torture."

"I saved their lives, so I have a hold upon them, and each one of that band I shall know and bring to justice."

Buffalo Bill spoke in a manner that showed he was deeply moved.

He had entered upon the trail of justice with a will to reach its end.

Boyd Bernard at once arose, and, stretching forth his hand, said:

"Mr. Cody, the cause that you have taken upon yourself to champion in the name of justice is our cause, and, all revenge aside, we make you our leader, for, as an officer of the army, you cannot lead simply an avenging crusade; but we will aid you, and what you can and will accomplish will be far more than avenging our wrongs."

"I accept the charge, men, and I say woe be unto those who perpetrated the foul wrong upon you!"

"And I not only say Amen to this, Cody, but I am with you on this trail to stay to see the bitter end, for such a crime shall not go unwhipped of justice, no, not against an Indian should it," declared Frank Powell, who had sat an attentive listener to all that had been said, and whose whole sympathy was with the wretched remnant of the band of Blue Belts, be their sins in the past what they might.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BOLD VENTURE.

Buffalo Bill proved to be a good weather prophet, for the wind begun to howl mournfully during the night, and when morning came a first-class blizzard was in full progress.

The wind was blowing at a seventy-mile-an-hour force, the snow was falling in blinding sheets, and the animals in the former cabin had cause to congratulate themselves that their masters had moved to other quarters.

The scout was out early to look to their comfort, they were led to water, then fed, and the shanty closed to the piercing tempest and intruding snow.

In the cabin the fire blazed cheerily and over and over again the Blue Belts thanked Buffalo Bill for his thoughtfulness for them.

"I believe we would have had a hard time in the shanty, though we were so much better, by contrast, with what we had suffered we did not know how bad it was," said Burt Boyd.

The driving and insinuating snow quickly showed the men where the weak points of the new cabin were, and they soon had them remedied.

A good breakfast followed, and then there was nothing to do but talk away the long, long, weary day.

Surgeon Powell had killed a couple of wild turkeys the day before; a deer, and several of the men had caught a large string of fish, so that fresh edibles were plentiful.

The fury of the storm soon blew itself out, the snow ceasing to fall before night, and the wind going down by dawn of the next day.

After a look at the heavens Buffalo Bill decided to start, as soon as he had taken a short round with Surgeon Powell after game.

A mule was taken along, and in an hour they returned with several fine deer and other game, for it would be some little time before the best off of the Blue Belts would be able to hunt for themselves.

The wounds of the men were given a good treatment and fresh dressing by Surgeon Powell, who gave orders just what to do when he was gone, and, after an early dinner, the two brave men bade good-bye to the Blue Belts, and, mounting their horses, started on their trail back to the fort, the mules in leading.

The Blue Belts stood under the shelter across the front of their cabin, watching the surgeon and the scout ride down the canyon, following them with cheers as long as they could see them.

"When next Buffalo Bill comes here, comrades, he will have been to Yellow Dust City and discovered much."

"Then our secret must come out, he must be told all."

"Heaven grant that in rescuing us no harm befall him, but we had no friends in Yellow Dust City, not one whom we could call upon to aid him if he needed it, and in that camp they are no respecter of persons."

So said Captain Boyd, as the two friends disappeared from sight, and his words implied that there was a secret to tell, one that Buffalo Bill must be told when he next visited the winter camp of the Blue Belts.

In the meanwhile the two comrades, in their second bold venture together, pushed on as rapidly as they could know-

ing full well that it was little less than a life and death struggle back to the fort.

They did not spare their horses, for the cold was intense, and they wished to reach the shelter of the pines for their night camp, where they had camped on their way to succor the outlawed band.

They saw night coming on rapidly, but were near their camping place, and reached it at sunset.

The best that could be done to shelter themselves and their horses was done, but it was an uncomfortable night for man and beast alike, and all seemed glad when the start at dawn was begun.

The weather was not settled, the wind blew half a gale, and lowering clouds were gathering, so that it was with a sigh of relief that Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell reached the old stockade cabin at nightfall.

Out of the cabin went yelping a pack of coyotes, and Buffalo Bill said humanely:

"I dislike to see even those coyotes forced out into such a night as this."

The snow was already falling, and Surgeon Powell remarked:

"Yes, how they stand it I do not know; but there is not room inside for the coyotes and ourselves, Bill."

"Hardly."

The horses felt well satisfied in their snug shelter, and their masters were well content over their pipes, after having enjoyed a good supper, the very howling of the storm outside making them feel the more comfortable.

"How is it outside, Bill?" asked Surgeon Powell, when Buffalo Bill looked out the next morning.

"Bad, Frank, and growing worse. I would not be surprised if this blizzard held on for days, and, as we have none too much provisions, and the cattle are eating their last meal of grain, I say risk it to the fort."

"You are the guide, and you made it in a worse storm than this."

"Under worse circumstances, for I was well-nigh used up then, and alone. We can make it, though this is no blizzard any man wishes to be out in, though we have the storm at our back, fortunately."

"Before it was in your face?"

"Yes."

Half an hour after the start was made in the bitter storm.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE "KING OF THE BLIZZARD."

Only a short distance had been made when both Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell realized that it would have been better to have put up with scant provisions and discomforts for a few days at the stockade cabin than to have made the daring venture to reach the fort.

From the direction the storm came both knew that it was good to last several days, perhaps a week.

It seemed to increase in violence each hour, and to find the way required the boldest nerve and an iron determination not to give up.

Riding up alongside his pard, Surgeon Powell said.

"This is awful, Bill."

"It is, indeed, sir. Are you very cold?"

"Not uncomfortably so; but the question is, can we stand it to keep on?"

"I never say die, Frank; but if you are cold, I'll turn back."

"Keep right on, Bill," was the plucky reply.

The plain was at last reached, the bearing taken by compass, and Buffalo Bill and the surgeon changed from their horses to the largest, strongest of the mules.

The other animals were then lashed together, two by two, and Surgeon Powell said that he would lead all, while Buffalo Bill devoted himself wholly to the duty of guiding, and that was a Herculean task in itself.

On they went out upon the plain, the daring guide never wavering, never faltering.

Suddenly, when about half way across, he halted.

"See there!"

"A fresh trail, by Heaven! Not half an hour old. I know it."

"Not so long as that, and a large one—fully a score of horses."

"Where can they be going?"

"They don't know; they are lost."

"We can overtake them?"

"Yes, easily."

"Then we will do just that."

"Yes, even if they were Indians."

"But they are not."

"No, iron-shod hoofs made those tracks, not Indians' ponies."

"We may lose our lives; but, then, it is duty."

"Yes, we must take the risk."

Buffalo Bill turned off after the trail, and soon saw that it was going at random.

"They are going in a circle, Frank, and death would end it before long."

He quickened his pace, and in a short while gave a loud whoop.

"Try it again, Bill, for this storm roars so a voice does not go very far, even your trumpet tones."

Again a whoop and another and another, as they rode along, until Surgeon Powell felt about his muffled form and drew forth a revolver. Then six shots were quickly fired.

A moment after came several answering shots.

Buffalo Bill pressed on with another loud whoop, Surgeon Powell following and also sending his voice echoing through the storm.

A few minutes more and they came upon a strange sight.

A party of twenty cavalrymen were grouped together in a circle.

In their midst were several others, so closely muffled as to be almost unrecognizable, yet Buffalo Bill saw that the horse of one bore the saddle of a general officer, that of the other had a woman's side saddle.

At sight of the scout, in spite of his wrappings, he was recognized, and a voice shouted:

"General, here is Buffalo Bill, sir! We are saved now, for he is the King of the Blizzard!"

The soldiers gave three cheers, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"Why, Captain Adams, is it you?"

"Yes, Cody, escorting General Easton and his daughter from Yellow Dust City to the fort."

"We had one of your men, Scout Bowles, as a guide, but he got bewildered, went ahead to try and find his way, and we gave him up for lost, so pushed on, and here we are."

"But you can save us, Cody?" and there was something pleading in the tones of Captain Adams, as he glanced toward the young girl seated in her saddle, her eyes fixed upon the scout, as her father tried to reassure her that now they would be all right, for the renowned scout of the plains, and whom the captain had just named the King of the Blizzard, would guide them.

"I will do what I can, Captain Adams, but not a moment is to be lost."

"THE KING OF THE BLIZZARD, now, and if your man will take the stock he is leading, he will go with me ahead."

"Come, sir, this is no time to tarry, for life hangs by a very slender thread in such a blizzard as this."

"We thought so a moment ago, Cody, but all have hope now, for the King of the Blizzard is our guide," replied the captain, cheerfully, just as Surgeon Powell rode up.

CHAPTER XXX.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

Buffalo Bill was presented by Captain Adams to General Easton and his daughter, both of whom had heard much of the scout, and, on their ride from Yellow Dust City the captain had told them of his great trail through the blizzard, and that he was then away from the fort.

risking his life to aid a snowbound party in the Death Valley Mountains.

The general had started late upon a tour of inspection, and had reached Gold Dust City in the last coach that came through that far.

Colonel Lennox had been expecting him, and Captain Adams had gone with an ambulance and twenty men to escort him to the fort, as it was known that his daughter would accompany him.

With the blizzards coming on nearly a month ahead of time, the general had been caught on the trail, but, unable to turn back, had continued on to Yellow Dust City, and there found Captain Adams.

It was decided to push right on to the fort, Miss May Easton going on horseback, as ambulances were out of the question, the captain having been unable to bring his through.

It was rough traveling all the way, but a deserted miners' camp off the trail, and known to scout Bowles, had been reached the first night, and fairly comfortable quarters found.

The start had been made early in the storm, and at last Scout Bowles, as many a good and skilled guide has done, got bewildered, lost his way, tried to find it, and could not get back.

Then the party had pushed on to cross the plain, and had gotten irrevocably lost when found by Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell.

A few more hours and their doom would have been death.

Speaking decidedly, as Captain Adams turned over to him the command of the party, Buffalo Bill said:

"Saving your lives depends a great deal upon yourselves.

"Let every one keep alert, not give up to the cold, keep your horses close up.

"To drop back fifty feet will be fatal, and we cannot turn about to look for any one.

"Wrap up warm.

"Are you ready?"

An affirmative answer was given, and Buffalo Bill rode to the front.

Just behind him was Surgeon Powell, not by his side, for he said:

"You can do best alone, Bill; but if you want me I am right here."

Then followed two cavalrymen with the led horses and mules to help break the way, and Captain Adams's men followed, then the general and his daughter.

Captain Adams brought up the rear to see that there would be no straggling of a half-frozen man from the line.

"How that man Cody finds his way is a puzzle to me.

"It seems as though we were simply going into an impenetrable snowbank," called back the general to Captain Adams, who answered:

"He is a mystery to all who know him in all that he does, sir.

"He has a compass, but one would be about as much use to me now as a fog-horn."

On, on, through the pitiless, driving snow, the screeching, terrible wind, and the blinding drifts went Buffalo Bill.

Bent low in his saddle, one muffled hand grasping the little compass, upon which his eyes were fixed, the other holding the reins, his spurs against the flanks of the large and powerful mule he bore, to keep him up to his work, the determined guide held on.

An hour passed, and the staggering, hard-pressed animals were cruelly feeling the strain.

But they all followed their leader.

The men, bent low, muffled from head to feet, yet half-numbed with cold, sat in their saddles, each face hard drawn and stern, each gaze striving hard to pierce the clouds of white ahead, hoping for the sight of the wooded ridge they were striving to reach.

Was Buffalo Bill wrong, they wondered, as the time went on.

Was the King of the Blizzard at fault?

Would they ever reach the goal?

Would the warm blood ever come through their benumbed veins again?

How they thought, how they hoped, and longed and suffered.

Silent, with only a word now and then in cheery tones to the men not to give up, the brave daughter of a brave soldier sat in her saddle, looking anything like the lovely girl and graceful form she was, enveloped in blankets and bear robes.

Stern and fearful, not for himself, but for his daughter and the men, General Easton rode by her side, while, with a cheery call to his soldiers from time to time, the never-despairing and dashing Captain Charlie Adams brought up the rear.

Next to the indomitable guide rode Frank Powell, his stern voice now and then heard in a word of cheer to the men.

An hour went by, then another hour, and all knew that the ridge must be near, if Buffalo Bill was right.

If Buffalo Bill was wrong, all equally well knew that death was near.

Another ten minutes and a shadowy mass appeared ahead.

"We have crossed the plain.

"The range is ahead of us," said Buffalo Bill, in tones as modest as though he had not proven himself a hero, the King of the Blizzard, indeed.

But, the men had heard, and a wild yell rose on the roar of the storm, and tears dimmed many eyes, freezing as they fell.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

A halt was made, but only for a moment; Buffalo Bill had struck the ridge; but he wished to see by his surroundings just where.

A moment's glance showed him, and he moved on along the range.

A short ride, and he turned into the foothills, overgrown with cedars, which protected all from the knifelike cutting of the wind.

A few moments more and they entered a narrow canyon, where was a small stream, but was now frozen hard.

Under the lee of a cliff there was no snow, the cedars grew thick, dead branches and logs lay about, and Buffalo Bill sprang from his saddle, calling out:

"Gather wood, men, and quickly.

"Come, don't be snails."

The order was needed, for the half-frozen men moved about with difficulty.

A fire was soon kindled, then another and another, the scout going from one to the other, while Surgeon Powell urged on some of the men in gathering wood, others in cutting holes in the ice and getting water to put on to boil, and also where their horses could drink.

The horses were led into the thicket, watered, blanketed, and given a feed of grain.

Coffee pots were on boiling, steaks of venison were broiling, also bacon, and crackers were warming.

The men began to get thawed.

At a fire apart and well sheltered, May Easton was enjoying the scene, for she was not as cold as the others, so warmly had she been wrapped.

Captain Adams came soon with a soldier, and her father and herself were given a good meal.

But all could see that Buffalo Bill was anxious to be on the way once more.

The battle against the blizzard was not yet over.

There must be still another desperate fight.

None knew better than Buffalo Bill what those twelve miles meant.

He saw that the storm was increasing momentarily in fury.

Calling to Surgeon Powell he said:

"We must get off, Frank."

"Yes, time is precious."

"If we had been out an hour longer on that plain half the men and horses would have died."

"I feared it all the while."

"We have yet a desperate struggle, for the storm is increasing."

"Yes, but how far off is the trail?"

"I can get into it in a ride of a quarter of a mile."

"Good!"

"But few would ever reach the fort, if any, had it not been for this halt, hot coffee, food, and thawing out."

"You are right, it saved the outfit; but what a nervy girl that is!"

"Game, indeed, and her father has shown great pluck, for he must suffer for her greatly."

"He does, and Captain Charlie Adams is one in a thousand. He deserves promotion for this trail."

"He does, indeed, and he is likely to get it, for he wins his way up."

"Well, I'll give the order to get ready now, so pour hot coffee down the outfit, Miss Easton included."

The cups of hot coffee were taken, the horses led up, blankets warmed, and Mary Easton was bundled up until she could hardly grasp her reins or see out of her mullings.

The roll of blankets Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell carried were opened and spread around, for they were the best prepared of all for the blizzard, and at the order of the scout they all mounted, saw that there were no "sneak holes" for the penetrating winds, and the start was made in the same order as before.

The men saw Buffalo Bill ride to the front in the same confident way as before, and when he turned into the regular trail he showed that he knew what he was about.

On, on, he went, guided by the surroundings he caught sight of from time to time when the trail could not be seen.

They progressed but slowly, and all knew that night would overtake them before reaching the fort.

Would the King of the Blizzard fail them then?

On they struggled, and the storm still increased in fury.

Soon the scout halted.

"Pass back this line and make fast to every horse."

"Night is upon us now, and there must be no hanging back!"

Such was the stern order of the guide, and then he moved ahead once more.

Darkness fell, and soon the form of Buffalo Bill could not be seen, for but a few paces about them could the men see.

Still on went the King of the Blizzard.

"God knows how he finds the way," muttered the general, and from the muffled form by his side came the fervently uttered words:

"God guide him!"

Behind now and then came the cheery voice of Captain Adams:

"Courage, men! Never fear, for night or day are alike to the King of the Blizzard!"

"Are we lost?" was the question upon every lip, and soon it was announced by Buffalo Bill:

"The lights of the fort are in sight!"

Such a cry as came from despairing men suddenly given hope for life was never before uttered!

The lights of the fort were ahead, soon visible to every eye, and seen by the almost dying horses, too, they struggled on with renewed hope.

But Buffalo Bill had dashed on ahead, and loud rang his voice at the stockade gate:

"Ho, within there! Open quick, in the name of humanity!"

"I am Buffalo Bill!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BUFFALO BILL'S TRIUMPH.

The ringing voice of the scout without startled the sentinel upon the fort wall, where he was crouching in his sentry box, for orders had been given that the men should seek that shelter during the storm.

No fear whatever was felt from the redskins, for what human being could face such a tempest of cold, snow, and wind?

The voice of the scout was recognized, though the sentinel, who had gone on post only two hours before could scarce believe his ears, and he called lustily for the corporal of the guard.

The guard turned out with a rush, wondering at the call, and was greeted with the startling information:

"Buffalo Bill is calling loudly at the main entrance for admittance!"

The gates swung open just as the party rode up, and the voice of Captain Adams was heard:

"It is General Easton and escort, sergeant!"

"Ay, ay, sir, and God bless you all that you got here; but it's Buffalo Bill did it!" replied the sergeant.

"Yes, Buffalo Bill found us lost and guided us here, sergeant."

"No other man could have done it," called back Captain Adams, as he followed the scout and Surgeon Powell on toward headquarters.

Captain Adams dismissed his men, save those leading the pack animals with the general's baggage, with order to get under shelter with all haste and report to the hospital.

Then he escorted the general and Miss Easton on to the quarters of Colonel Lennox, whither Buffalo Bill had rapidly ridden and announced their coming, so that there would be no delay.

"I will go on with you, Bill, to see if the general or that poor girl need my aid," said Surgeon Powell.

It was a surprise, indeed, to Colonel Lennox to welcome the general in such a blizzard, and he asked vigorously:

"In God's name, how did you make it?"

"Through that noble fellow's aid, Buffalo Bill, whom Captain Adams justly calls the King of the Blizzard," answered the general, and he turned to thank the scout, but he was gone.

"We owe much to you, also, Surgeon Powell," he said.

"I have remained, sir, to report my return, with Cody's, to Colonel Lennox, and to see if either yourself or Miss Easton need my aid?"

"My dear Powell, you need aid as much as we do, so quickly go to your quarters, and see to it that Buffalo Bill is cared for, too."

"If either myself or daughter need medical aid, we will call in your assistant to thaw us out, only let him look after you and the men first, not forgetting you, Captain Adams, though you did really so enjoy the blizzard."

As Miss Easton had already been taken in charge by Mrs. Lennox, and the general was in good hands, Surgeon Powell and Captain Adams left for their quarters.

Their first duty, however, was to see that the men had been properly cared for, and it was found that Buffalo Bill had already gone on the rounds, and reported that about two-thirds of the soldiers were badly frostbitten, several of them dangerously so, while nearly all of the horses would be of little use after their game and desperate fight for life.

"I am cold, yes, clear to my bones, but a hot drink has already helped, and I'll soon be all right," said Buffalo Bill, as he sat in Surgeon Powell's comfortable quarters.

"Well, Bill, you are about the toughest pine knot I know, for I confess that I am about used up; but you rode on ahead, with the weight of twenty-four lives on your shoulders, one a young girl, and not to speak of your own, and never once flinched from the appalling ordeal."

"I dared not."

"There was too much at stake."

"But did you see what I did as we reached the trail?"

"You saw him, then?"

"Yes."

"I thought that you did; but I suppose you said nothing for the same reason that I did."

"Not to demoralize the men, or shock Miss Easton. Yes."

"My horse was almost upon him when I saw him lying in the snow."

"Not ten feet from him lay his horse, also dead."

"It was poor Bowles, of course?"

"Yes, he had found the trail, but too late, for his horse no doubt went down, and he could do nothing, so laid down to die."

"I'll go after the poor fellow's body to-morrow."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, if this storm keeps up, Bill, and I believe that it will."

"But the coyotes will eat him, and—"

"No coyote will move out of his den such weather as this."

"Send your scouts out if the storm breaks, for go yourself you shall not, as you seem to forget that you wish to go to Yellow Dust City as soon as you can get there, and you need rest, or the next thing will be William F. Cody dead in the snow."

"What, the King of the Blizzard freeze to death, Frank?" asked Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"It might be; but, joking aside, you rest for a few days, if you wish to go to Yellow Dust, for if you do not lay by I'll have the colonel order you not to leave the fort."

"I'll obey orders," was the smiling reply, and folding his stormcoat about him, Buffalo Bill went over to his own quarters, and was welcomed by his company of scouts.

The joy at their chief's return was dampened when told that their comrade, Bowles, lay dead in the snow some ten miles from the fort.

Once warmed through, with a blazing fire on the broad hearth of his little cabin, Buffalo Bill turned in to seek the rest he so greatly needed and so well had earned.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MINERS' RECEPTION.

For days longer the bitter winds blew and hail and snow drove over the land, blocking all trails and keeping all indoors save those whom garrison duty forced to face the dread storm without, and the party sent to bring in Scout Bowles's body for burial.

General Easton and May were not much the worse for their appalling experience, and the former said that he would return to Yellow Dust the moment that it was possible for him to do so.

The coaches always ran through the winter, when it was possible to do so, and the plains below Yellow Dust were not often blocked with snow, so that he could easily reach the next post, once he got to the mining camps.

Duty demanded his presence elsewhere, and he determined to make the venture, if, as he said, Buffalo Bill would lead the party.

The scout was sent for by Colonel Lennox and questioned upon the possibilities of the ride, and said he was sure such a storm, so early in the season, would be followed by milder weather.

Arrangements were therefore made for the return, the scout suggesting that the start be made in the afternoon, and a night halt made at the stockade cabin, which the men could readily put in condition, for there were half a dozen rooms in the old fort.

The next night a halt would be made at Cave Canyon, where all would be again sheltered, and Miss Easton could be made comfortable.

This was the plan, and the start was made the day after the blizzard ceased.

"I may remain some little time, Frank, but if I need you I will find a way of getting you word," said Buffalo Bill.

Riding on more rapidly than the escort, which was again under the command of Captain Adams, Buffalo Bill took with him half a dozen soldiers, and when the party arrived at the stockade all was ready for them.

The next day Cave Canyon was made, with a long halt at noon, and a tent

carried by a pack horse was pitched for Miss Easton, the general sharing a cavern with the men.

It was noon when, the day following, the party rode up to the Golden Arms, Buffalo Bill having again gone on ahead to have all in readiness for the distinguished visitors to the mining camp.

Colonel Camp was wild with excitement at the coming of Miss Easton, and did all in his power, as he said:

"To make her feel that she was really, in her own home."

To the "Colonel's" regret, however, and the delight of General Easton and his daughter, it had been decided to send a stage out that afternoon, a six-mule sled, having been sent over the trail to break the way, where it was needed, and returning reported all clear.

May Easton was glad of the chance to get a look at wild life in a mining camp, and yet she was soon satisfied with her experience.

Like wildfire the news of her coming had spread, and as a young and pretty girl was a rare avis that seldom lighted in Yellow Dust City, every miner in the camps, every hanger-on, and those of every other calling was most anxious to see her.

They "cleaned up," and in their best toilets were soon on the run for the Golden Arms, and a request was made that Miss Easton would come out and just take a look at the boys, which really meant that they should have a peep at her.

May accepted with a smile, and made her appearance, with her father and Captain Adams.

The shout that greeted her made her shrink, but she blushed deeply, and bowed to the compliment of one honest fellow, who cried:

"Yer is ther prettiest gal I ever seen."

A cheer of approval greeted this, and then the colonel came to announce dinner.

It was the best dinner ever served in the Golden Arms, and was well enjoyed.

Then the stage was announced, and preparations were made for the start, for thirty miles were to be made that afternoon, for a halt at night at a stock-tender's cabin, where there was accommodation for travelers.

"I am glad you are to go on the box, Bob White," said Buffalo Bill, recognizing the driver who was to take the coach out, as an old soldier and plainsman, and one who could handle the reins with any man of the Overland Trail.

"And I wish you were going along, too, Bill, for I don't like some whispering I have seen among several of the bad ones in this camp, for it is thought the old general has money."

"Say nothing about it, Bob, and don't worry," was Buffalo Bill's reply, and, somehow, Bob White seemed perfectly satisfied with it.

Soon after the general and his daughter came out, good-bys were said, the father and daughter warmly pressing the scout's hand at parting, and at a signal from Colonel Camp, the landlord, Bob White mounted his box and the coach rolled away, drawn by a team of six fine horses.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CHIN-CHIN JIM.

Buffalo Bill's eyes had been busy when he arrived in Yellow Dust City. He was trying to recall faces.

He did recall a number which he had seen before, and was sifting those he had met incidentally on former visits to Yellow Dust City from those he believed he had guided over a night trail through a storm when life was at stake.

The fact that no one had yet referred to that trip was a surprise to him, but he had something on his mind that worried him more.

It was what Bob White, the stage driver, had said to him.

"Captain Adams, you intend to remain here until to-morrow before starting

back, I believe?" the scout remarked, as the coach drove up. "May I ask you to do me a favor, sir?"

"Certainly."

"Will you start now, saying you will go to Cave Canyon to-night?"

"Why, yes; yet I don't see the reason, for I am glad enough to get a night in camp here."

"True, sir; but the reason is that I believe a storm will set in before three days, and it would be well to be near the fort when it begins."

"I have no fear with you along, Cody."

"But I am not to return with you, sir."

"Ah!"

"Lem Todd will carry you back all right, sir, and I brought him along for that purpose."

"He is a good scout, Cody; but why do you remain?"

"I wish to do so on a little matter of business, captain, which I cannot explain now, sir."

"You know best, and I will of course, leave this afternoon, especially as you do not go with us."

"Now to the other reason, sir."

"Ah, yes; there were two, you said."

"I don't exactly like several movements I have seen here, and I will follow the coach, for I deem it important."

"Then I should do so by all means."

"It would be useless, sir, for did you have with you men no move would be made against the coach."

"But you?"

"Will leave the camp with you, sir, on the Fort Trail, cut across with you, sir, and several men to the Stage Trail, when several miles out from here, and be ready to aid if aid is needed."

"Yes, that is all right."

"If an attack is made on the coach, sir, it will be within twenty miles of this camp, for men will not remain out at night this weather, and they would wish to get back or to some retreat they know of."

"By starting at once, sir, we can soon be on their trail, cutting across, as I said, from the Fort Trail, and the work done, I can guide you across to the Cave Canyon to-night."

"Cody, I am in your hands, so say what you wish and I'll give the orders."

"Then tell the colonel that fearing bad weather you have decided to start at once."

"I'll do it."

The colonel looked sad, indeed, when he learned of the intention of Captain Adams, and when the bugler sounded the bugle to call the soldiers, all the men of the camp within hearing came on the jump.

The result was a crowd about the Golden Arms as large almost as had been there a short while before to see May Weston.

As most of them had gone off simply to "take something," they had not gotten very far away, for it was, as is always the case with men at a bar, a case of "repeat."

When the crowd learned that the soldiers were to return at once to the fort, fearing another storm, and that Buffalo Bill was to accompany them, there was considerable excitement, quick consultation, and then, as the cavalry came to the front, mounted for the march, one of the men, known as a rather hard citizen, but possessing oratorical powers, suddenly shouted for order.

Order was instantaneous, and every eye was upon "Chin-Chin Jim."

Now, Chin-Chin Jim was not a Chinnee, by any means, as his name might indicate, but an out and out borderman.

His "jaw music" and "tongue wag," as it was expressed in Yellow Dust City, had given him his name.

When there was a speech to make, Chin-Chin Jim was called upon.

At burials he preached the sermon as eloquently over a dead de perado as over the best man in camp.

He possessed a sonorous, musical voice, and all liked to hear him talk.

In fact, in shooting scrapes the cry was frequently heard:

"Look out there! Don't hit Chin-Chin Jim by mistake!"

As Jim was generally around when there was a row, he spent much of his time in dodging bullets.

He sang well, accompanying himself on the guitar; played the violin, could bring tears to the eyes of his audience in preaching a funeral sermon, but those who thought that Chin-Chin Jim was not a devil at heart didn't know him.

He played poker to win, but never for big money; he drank liquor from love of it, but never got drunk, and when cornered he had fought, shooting to kill.

Such was the man who had suddenly called the miners of Yellow Dust "to order."

CHAPTER XXXV.

BORDER ELOQUENCE.

"Order! Order!" shouted Chin-Chin Jim although the crowd had become perfectly quiet at his first call.

But Jim wished to be sure that the attention of all was riveted upon him.

"Gentlemen, I has a few words to say, and a vote of thanks ter give ter one who is most desarvin'."

The crowd looked at each other in wonder, as to where the lightning was going to strike.

"I wishes them gallant Boys in Blue, led by ther dashingist of capt'ins in ther army ter hear what I has ter say, fer ef it don't consarn them individual like, it do consarn one of the greatest of humans in whom they holds an interest."

Captain Adams could not give the order to march after this.

"It were ther intention of some of our beloved, called tergether on this mournful occasion—why, d— it, pards, I'm off ther trail onter a funeral sermon—I means ter say that it were ther intention of a number of more or less respected pilgrims of Yellow Dust City ter call a caucus fer ter-night in the colonel's game saloon, fer ter do honor to a man of whom we feels proud ter hev in our midst, a man as stands rig in this country and is known to the crowned heads far and wide in ther countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

"But circumstances which we galoots can't allus control has broke in upon us, and our plans fer ter-night's jubilee hev faded as doth the flower that is bad hit by ther frosted breath of ther howlin' blizzard of ther Rockies.

"What has downed us in this are particular is the fact that we can't hev all things ter please us.

"Man groweth up like a toad-stool, and is cut down by a mule hoof—thar I go ag'in inter graveyard chin music.

"But, ter continue:

"As we can't have ther blow-out ter-night, with free whisky and halleyujahs, I has been honored by them that wishes ter do ther duty, ter express in public ther feelings they has in private—hold on thar, Buffalo Bill, for I is gittin' onter your trail now.

"Ther fact is, pards, a few weeks ago a party of prospectors, thinking ter find more gold in ther up country then was being dug here in Yellow Dust, started out on a venture.

"But beware of ther glitter of gold, my pards!

"Ther gold war not; ther trail was lost; ther snows they descended and did beat upon them poor mortals, until they war almost froze.

"They did wilt as ther flower; ther food give out, and lo! and behold! they war like ther lost lambs of Israel, beset with death.

"Then, suddenly, like a beacon to their mariner on ther sea's, come a man on horseback inter ther camp.

"Thar he be, gents! He sitteth upon his horse to tell you all.

"I am Buffalo Bill!"

"He did come to them poor lost coyotes of Israel; he did bid them to follow him, and he would lead them to ther Promised Land."

"Through darkness and despair, through wind and snow, never failing, he led them on."

"One fell by the wayside, a corpse."

"I preached his funeral discourse, you remember, and brought loving tears inter ther eyes of pilgrims, tears that froze as they fell, fer it were dead cold, yer all remember."

"Another fell by ther wayside, and I buried him, too, but ther cold froze my eloquence."

"But on went Buffalo Bill, straight—no, it's a zigzag trail, but poetically speaking, straight as ther arer flies to ther heart of a dove, until he reached the sheltering embrace of the Golden Arms."

"There the poor, frozen pilgrims found rest, warmth, and shelter, but the hero who had saved them, waiting for no thanks, pushed on where duty called him."

"Now, pards, it is ther pleasure of this meeting ter give ter Buffalo Bill a vote of thanks, and ter lay before him a golden offering, this bag of gold dust, which ther men he saved wishes him to accept, ter do with as he will."

Yells that were deafening followed this specimen of Chin-Chin Jim's eloquence, hats were thrown into the air, revolvers fired, and the name of Buffalo Bill resounded from hundreds of lips.

The scout's face was pale, rather than flushed. His eyes burned brightly, but a stern look hovered about his mouth rather than one of deep gratitude for the vote of thanks and the gift of gold.

He took off his broad sombrero, however, and bowed to the crowd his thanks; then he rode up to where Chin-Chin Jim stood on the piazza, the bag of gold in his hand, and said:

"I thank you, pard, for your very complimentary allusions to myself, and through you those who have extended to me this valuable gift; but what I did was only duty to fellow-men in distress, and in the line of duties I am expected to render."

"The Government pays me for my services, and I have never been guilty of taking pay for a human life, so I will not do so now, save to hand over to Colonel Camp, Storekeeper Sule Ross, and Mina Carl Camp this bag of gold, which they can devote as a fund to aid poor unfortunates who need it far more than I do."

He did not touch the bag, and the colonel, Sule Ross, and Carl Waring, standing near, stepped forward at his call and took it in charge, amid the wild shouts of the crowd.

Again lifting his hat, Buffalo Bill drew his horse back to the head of the troop, and said in a low tone:

"I am ready, Captain Adams. We have already lost too much precious time."

"What a remarkable scene, Cody! This is a land of wonders," was the captain's answer, and he gave the order to march, and the troop went off at a trot that increased in speed as Yellow Dust City was left further behind.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE STAGE TRAIL.

Down the trail rode Buffalo Bill, guiding the trooper escort.

After several miles had been gone over he halted and said:

"Here is where we turn off, sir, for the winding of this trail southward, and of the stage trail northward, brings them but three miles apart here, and there is a narrow canyon cutting through the range."

"We will take it, Cody. How many men do you wish?"

"Say half a dozen of the best mounted, sir, with twenty-four hours of supplies and an extra horse."

The men were quickly selected, the supplies put upon one of the pack horses,

and with the sergeant in command and Scout Lem Todd as guide, the escort was ordered to go on to Cave Canyon for the night.

Riding by the side of Buffalo Bill, the half-dozen troopers following, Captain Adams gave the order, and the push ahead was made through the narrow canyon.

Fortunately, the hard wind had almost swept it clear of snow, but in places there was a sharp, hard struggle for the horses.

The stage trail was reached, and after a close examination by the scout he cried:

"They have gone by, sir."

"The coach?"

"Yes, sir; but those who followed it, also."

"Then we must hasten."

"There are seven horses along, sir, as near as I can get hold of the tracks."

"None too many for us, for we are eight."

"Yes, sir, it will be easy work for us."

"Shall we follow?"

"Yes, sir, and we have things our own way, I think," and Buffalo Bill turned down the stage trail.

Half a dozen miles were gone over, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"The first relay station is not over two miles ahead, and this is fifteen miles from Yellow Dust."

"I do not believe the coach is a mile from here, and the attack will be made before it reaches the relay station—hark!"

All listened, and a shot was heard, not a quarter of a mile ahead on the trail.

"They are at it, sir," and Buffalo Bill spurred on, Captain Adams by his side, the men three abreast following.

The coach had meanwhile pulled along at a good gait.

Bob White did not care to be in the night reaching the relay where the halt was to be made until the next morning.

Men froze quickly in such weather, and he was anxious to get down out of the mountain country, where the storms were less severe, the snow did not block the way, and he could hold on his trail.

He felt the full responsibility of his charge.

A general and a young girl were what did not fall to his lot but once in a lifetime.

Bob White knew the men of Gold Dust City, good and bad, and did not trust those he had seen whispering together, for he was sure they meant mischief, and that the coach was their game.

What Buffalo Bill had said to him made him feel more at ease, yet he was not altogether satisfied with his lot.

To tell the general would only be to cause him anxiety, when perhaps there might be no real cause, only his fears.

But Bob White drove along at a good pace. He did not expect to be headed off, but overtaken, and he felt sure it would be before he reached the first relay, eighteen miles from Yellow Dust.

Even for gold men would not care to go further and risk a night out, and with two stock tenders at the station, the general, and himself, the outlaws would not attack them there.

"I'm almost there," he muttered, as he drove around a turn in the trail and knew that the relay station was not two miles away.

"Perhaps I'll make it, but maybe Buffalo Bill has caught the fellows already? That is what he meant."

So mused Bob White as he drove along. Then an idea flashed through his mind to look behind him.

What he saw caused him to turn pale. Five men were coming at a gallop behind him. All were so muffled up that he could not see enough of any one of them to recognize him.

But he knew that the ordeal was upon him; so he called out to his passengers:

"General, five horsemen are coming after us, sir, and I don't believe they mean any good. It won't do to be reckless; but be guided by circumstances as to what we had best do."

The general felt a chill at his heart, such as he had never known in personal danger. It was apprehension for his beautiful daughter.

"I will be prepared to defend myself and my daughter, driver," he replied, and got his revolvers ready.

Another glance behind showed Bob White that the horsemen were coming up rapidly. Their horses seemed to have been hard ridden to catch up with the coach.

Nearer they came, showing no weapons, nor halting him.

A bend of the trail put them out of sight, and Bob White was tempted to run for it; but he knew this would be useless in the rough condition of the trail.

A moment after the horsemen dashed around the bend, and as they came up one of them called out:

"We have had a hard ride of it, senor, to overtake you."

"What for?"

"The colonel sent us along as an escort."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A GIRL'S PLUCK.

The general breathed more freely at their reply; but Bob White did not.

The general had his weapons ready, and the driver had his at hand.

The statement of the horsemen seemed all right, but why should the colonel, who was stage agent, become anxious about such distinguished passengers in such cold weather, and send men to see that they arrived all right at the right halting place?

"If you are all right, Bob, we'll go back and report," spoke the leader, adding:

"It's a bad night to be caught out in."

"Hold on, driver, a moment," called out the general.

Bob White drew rein and felt that he had been wrong, after all.

"Return, my good fellows, and tell Landlord Camp that I appreciate his kindness and thank him."

"We are getting along all right, and as we descend the mountains will have less snow and cold."

"Here, warm yourselves with this when you return, for you will need it."

As he spoke the general extended his hand containing a twenty-dollar gold piece as a return for the kindness of the horsemen.

But the general's hand was grasped in a grip of steel by the man to whom he had generously extended the gift, and a revolver was shoved full in his face, while the words came threateningly:

"Move an inch and you are a dead man! Submit and you will not be harmed!"

"Release my father, sir!" came in a clear, musical, but determined voice from the coach, and May Easton grasped the revolver her father had laid by his side to get the gold coin from his pocket.

The man laughed at her words and act, but his laugh was followed by a shot, a cry of pain, and the man's hand dropped to his side, his weapon falling from it, for the bullet had entered his shoulder.

"Bravo, my child! Now I can take a hand in this trouble," cried the general, seizing his revolver from his daughter's hand. But the outlaw had dropped to the ground from his saddle and sprung under the coach, while he called out to his men:

"Unless that man submits, riddle the coach with bullets, men!"

The four horsemen had slipped to the ground on the off side of their horses, and their rifles were leveled across their saddles.

One rifle covered Bob White. The others were aimed at the body of the coach.

This was a move the general had not anticipated; yet it was just what Bob White had feared.

Though admiring the pluck of May Easton, he feared that it would cause an other trouble.

Had he seen a chance of resistance, Bob would have been the one to fight it out; but he knew only too well that all odds were against their success.

The general, too, realized that he was cornered.

Men of the outlaw stripe on the Overland trail and its branches would commit any crime for gold—would just as soon kill as not; in fact, would prefer to rob a dead body to a live one.

The threat to fire upon the coach meant that his daughter would be exposed to the fire. An old soldier, he had faced bullets too often not to realize their deadliness in such close quarter fire.

"Better surrender, general, for these devils will be as good as their word," urged the driver.

"It is hard, indeed, to submit to the coward hounds."

"Yes, sir; but they have the odds, over two to one. I am covered by a rifle, and three others are aiming at the back of the coach, sir."

"Yes, but—"

"General think of your pretty daughter, sir!"

"I will, I—"

"Father, do not think of me, but do as you deem best."

"Driver, we will fight it out!"

"Oh, God, what a girl!" cried Bob White, in an outburst of admiration at the pluck shown by May Easton.

But, the very nerve shown by his daughter decided the general in his course.

She was his only child; he was a widower; so May was all he had in the world to love.

He would take no chances, for her sake, and so he called out:

"I submit."

"Rob me, and let us continue our journey."

"You are wise, general. Men, put your masks on, so that Bob White won't know you. Then do the searching, for this bullet in my shoulder hurts to kill."

The four road bandits, one at a time, put black masks over their faces, while their leader rose from beneath the coach, also wearing one, and with a revolver in his left hand, his right hanging limp at his side.

Two of the men still had their rifles leveled as they advanced, one covering Bob White, the other the general.

They had hitched their horses to one side of the trail, and as they came up to the coach their leader said:

"Look out for that girl, for I have felt her claws. If she uses a revolver just kill her father without a word!"

"I will not fire," cried May, in alarm, and the general asked, sternly:

"Come, what is your will?"

"To hold your daughter a prisoner until you pay us big money for her ransom, for we know you've got it, general."

As the ruffian uttered the last word he dropped dead!

A bullet had crashed through his brain.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SHOTS THAT TOLD.

The four outlaws, gathered on each side of the coach, stood dumb at the shot, fatal to their leader.

At first they seemed to believe that it had been fired by Bob White.

Then the thought flashed upon them that May Easton, in defiance of the threats against her father, had shot their leader.

But they had only a second to consider; then they were brought to a quick realization of what had happened, for another shot dropped one of their number.

At that instant Buffalo Bill and Captain Charlie Adams dashed around the turn in the trail, a hundred feet away!

They were on foot, revolvers in hand, and at sight of them Bob White pulled trigger, dropping a third of the outlaws.

At that moment the six soldiers, whom their captain and the scout had distanced in the ride to the rescue, came at a gallop around the bend.

"Hands up, or drop dead in your tracks," shouted Buffalo Bill, and the two men, seeing that they could not reach their horses, and knowing that it was death to attempt to fly on foot, raised their hands quickly.

"Ah, Cody, another debt of gratitude to owe you, my good friend."

"Why, do you know these wretches intended to kidnap my daughter?"

"They are capable of anything, sir."

"Ah, Captain Adams, you, too, are one of our rescuers!" The general had sprung out of the coach, and now warmly wrung the hand of the officer and the scout, while he expressed his thanks to the soldiers, also.

Leaping lightly out of the coach, May also expressed her gratitude to all, and was complimented for her pluck and good shooting, for Bob White told the story of the hold-up as it had occurred.

"I did not wish his life on my hands, so fired to wound him only," said May, modestly.

"Cody sent him on his last trail, Miss Easton," remarked Captain Adams. "It was a crack shot at long range around the bend with his revolver."

"And the captain got his man by a crack shot, I should say," the scout rejoined, while Bob White added:

"I couldn't miss mine, I was so close."

"Your men have secured the prisoners, Captain Adams, and we had best not detain the coach, sir," said Buffalo Bill.

"You are right, and I am sure it will not be held up again, general."

"I have no further fear of it, captain."

"But, you do not realize what you gentlemen have done for me and mine."

"I shall have to ask you, general," broke in Buffalo Bill, "to carry these three bodies on the top of the coach to the next relay station, where they will be buried by the stock tenders."

"Certainly, Cody."

"But, I desire a look at their faces first," and Buffalo Bill drew the mask and muffler from the face of the leader.

"Yes," was all he said.

The faces of the other two were then looked at, and of one the scout simply added:

"Another!"

At the third he shook his head in a dubious way, as he looked sharply at him.

"What about the prisoners, Bill?"

"We will take them, Bob, for they are wanted at the fort," was the reply.

The three dead outlaws were then put on the top of the coach and strapped there, when Buffalo Bill said, in a low tone, to Bob White:

"Your horses have had twenty minutes' rest, so rush them to the station with all speed. When you get there take the best team and push them hard for the night halt, for more bad weather is threatening, and I fear dark will catch you before you get there."

"It does look so, Pard Cody."

"I'll tell you what to do: There are two men at the next relay. Mount one of them or a fresh horse and send him flying through to your night halting place to get a fresh team and bring them to meet you."

"If he hurries he can meet you eight miles or so from the station, and then you can put both teams through for all they are worth."

"Right you are, Pard Scout, and I thank you for the suggestion. You always have your clever wits about you and know just what to do at the right time."

"It will get me there before night, for I can make each team fly."

"All ready!" and Bob White mounted his box.

Farewells were said, and off went the coach at a clipping pace, for Bob White knew well that it would never do for night to catch him on that snow-bound trail.

"Now, captain, we must ride for it, and I'll push right on to Cave Canyon with

you, as night will catch us before we get there."

"You are right, Cody."

"And I don't like the looks of the weather, sir."

"Nor do I. I hope the coach will not be caught in it."

"No, sir; White will not spare the silk, and at the night halting place there is a good cabin for the accommodation of travelers, and very good meals can be had, should the general and his daughter be snow-bound for a few days."

The prisoners were already mounted, bound to their saddles, but carefully protected against the cold.

With the five horses of the outlaws and the extra animal brought along, each soldier had a horse to lead.

Buffalo Bill rode to the front, the captain saying he would bring up the rear, not to let the horses lag, and so the start was made.

"Will we have to go back to where we crossed to the trail?" called out Captain Adams.

"Yes, sir; with the snow in the mountains we will, for it will not do to take chances."

"By no means. You are the pilot; go ahead!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TWO PRISONERS.

It was the right thing, as Buffalo Bill had said, to take no chances.

The trail they had come was well broken back over the stage route, and they traveled rapidly, the scout setting a pace that would get them well on their way along the Fort Trail before night overtook them.

When night did come on the horses were well worn by their rough ride, and they yet had several miles to go to reach the Cave Canyon.

An hour or so after dark they reached the canyon, and were greeted with a cheer.

A hot supper was ready for them, and the soldiers already there looked after the tired horses.

The prisoners were well treated also, but appeared to have little appetite for the good supper given them.

With their own blankets, and those taken from their dead comrades, they were to be made comfortable in one of the large caverns with the soldiers, their bonds also to be taken off, as there was no chance of their escape.

The small cave occupied by May Easton the night before Captain Adams took telling Buffalo Bill to share it with him.

A fire was built in the mouth of the cave, and at the request of the scout Captain Adams ordered the two prisoners brought there for him to have a talk with.

They soon came, pale and anxious looking.

"Men, I wish to have a talk with you, and you might as well tell the truth, for I know more than you think I do, and will catch you in any lie you utter," said the scout.

The two prisoners made no reply. They were anxious, beyond a doubt, for they seemed to feel that short work would be made with them at the fort.

"Do you intend to tell me the truth?"

"If it pays us," said one.

"Does a man on the brink of the grave want money?" sternly demanded Buffalo Bill.

The men shuddered at the thought, and the one who had spoken hastened to say:

"I didn't mean money. I meant terms."

"What kind of terms?"

"Our lives."

"Ah! You know that you deserve hanging."

"We expects nothin' else."

"You are wise."

"If you give us our lives we'll talk; not without."

"That's all," claimed in the other.

"I do not believe your information is that valuable."

"We knows a heap."

"So do I."

"Come, Buffalo Bill; trade what we knows for our lives."

"No. I'll get it without allowing two such villains as you are to escape the gallows."

This staggered the men, and they looked anxiously at each other, while the scout said:

"Your leader to-day was none other than the man who had such a flow of language in presenting me a vote of thanks."

"He's quit his chin music now," assured one.

"Oh, yes, his name was Chin-Chin Jim. I've seen him before—just where I saw you before to-day."

"Whar was that?"

"You were both among the men I led through the storm."

The men grew more and more uneasy.

"I recognize you both now."

"Well, we didn't shoot at you, or go to rob you."

"I know that."

"You shot Chin-Chin and run in on us."

"Yes."

"We was a holdin' up ther general."

"I am aware of that. But, why?"

"He had the dust, or if we took what was worth it we could get it."

"His daughter?"

"Yes."

"Where would you have taken her?"

"Back to Yellow Dust City."

"You certainly did not expect to take a lady to your camp and not have it known?"

"Yes, we did, for Chin-Chin had a place to take her, but where we didn't know."

"Is that the truth?"

"Was he your leader?"

"Yes, but he's quit leading now."

"He was your leader when you were out on that prospecting trail when you so nearly lost your lives?"

After a moment one of the men nodded and the other said:

"He were."

"Now you are both lying, for your leader on that occasion was a very different man, in both voice and bearing."

The men were silent, and Buffalo Bill asked:

"Are you two, and were those three who were killed, the only ones of the band I guided to Yellow Dust City who were outlaws?"

"Yes, we was all."

Buffalo Bill smiled, but asked:

"Where are the men who were on that prospecting tour?"

"Two died on ther trail that night, yer remember, and two died soon after from exposure, while Old Rhubarb sawed the arm off of one and a leg off of another."

"Them three men you seen turn ther toes up ter-day, and here we two is."

Buffalo Bill said nothing, but in his mind he was working out a sum in arithmetic.

He was counting as follows:

"Two died on the trail, two more after arriving in camp, making four."

"Two lost a limb, so six are accounted for, and three were killed to-day, and they make nine, with these two prisoners, running the number up to eleven that are accounted for."

"Eleven from twenty-seven leave sixteen yet to account for, a rather quick thinning out of the band."

"And those sixteen are to be spotted, for I know some men in winter quarters up in Death Valley Mountains very anxious to meet them again."

Then turning to Captain Adams, the scout added:

"I know all I care to from these men, sir, so the sergeant can take them; but if you will ask Colonel Lennox to hold them for trial some little time, I can promise him more prisoners, or at least more testimony to condemn these two."

CHAPTER XL.

SAVING A FOE.

The storm did not materialize during the night, but when the day dawned the clouds hung low and were very threatening.

"Push for the stockade cabin, Captain Adams, with all haste, for the quarters there are good, should we be snowed in for a few days, and here you could not stand it, sir."

"You are right, Cody, and without delaying for a noon halt we should reach the stockade some hour or two before night."

"Yes, sir."

"I wish that you were going with us."

"I think I can be of more service just now, sir, in Yellow Dust City," was the reply.

"Well, take care of yourself, and I shall let the colonel know that you saved the general."

"With your aid, sir," and with a military salute to the captain Buffalo Bill saw him go on after his men, when he turned back on the trail to Yellow Dust City.

He rode slowly, for he did not care to arrive in the camps before nightfall, unless the storm should hasten his steps.

He halted at noon for quite a long rest, cooked for himself a good dinner, and was enjoying his pipe, when he saw that the wind was bending the trees upon the mountain heights, and clouds of snow were skurrying along.

"We must be on our way, old horse, for this looks like another bitter blizzard, and we don't wish to get too much of it," he said, and, rising from the fire, he saddled his horse, mounted, and continued on his way.

"If the captain pushed right on, and it is his style, he is within ten miles of the stockade now, so can reach there before the snow hides the trail.

"But Lem Todd is a good guide, and it would be hard to lose him," he mused, and then quickened the pace of his own horse, for the storm was momentarily increasing in violence, and threatening to be another blizzard to remember.

Suddenly, through the storm he beheld a horse and rider, both cowering under the shelter of a rock and in a retreat that from a less severe storm might be fairly safe, but in that tempest was poor, indeed.

"Ho, pard, have you halted there to die—by Jove! it is an Indian!" and Buffalo Bill dropped his hand to bring his rifle around for use.

But, the redskin did not move, nor his pony, either.

Instantly the scout was by his side, his hand upon his shoulder.

The red rider made an effort to raise his hands, but could not, then stared vacantly at the scout.

"Freezing to death, as I live!"

Out came the scout's flask of liquor and a generous draught was forced down the red throat.

The Indian wore the full togs and war bonnet of a chief of high rank, and was yet a comparatively young man.

He seemed to feel, when the drink was forced into his mouth, that he had found a friend, but he could mutter but a word or two.

"Come, I'll fix you," and Buffalo Bill sprang from his saddle, gathered rapidly an armful of wood, put it in the most sheltered crevice of the rock he could find, and in a few minutes had a roaring fire.

He fairly lifted the redskin out of his saddle and placed him where he could feel the warmth, gave him another drink, and then unrolled his bed blankets and put them about him.

Taking from his traps his coffee pot and provisions, he soon had some water boiling and some venison broiling.

The Indian pony and his own horse were led up near to the fire, the scout knowing that it would keep the chill off.

Turning to the Indian again he found him much improved by the liquor and the warmth.

"Paleface chief good to his red foe," he murmured in English.

"Red brother, now you are in distress, chief. You were mighty near the Happy Hunting Grounds, but you are coming around all right," said the scout, as he prepared the Indian's coffee and food.

"Redskin die, paleface too," and the chief looked at the driving storm.

"You bet we won't! We will be all right as soon as I thaw you out, and then I'll take you to good quarters with me, though we'll have a struggle of it in this storm. Come, drink this, and then eat."

The chief needed no second bidding. He drank the coffee and devoured the venison and crackers in a way that showed he was most starved.

The scout watched him attentively, and when he felt that he was warmed clear through, he made him stand up by the fire, while he wrapped his blankets about him.

Leading the pony nearer, he aided him to mount, and then tucked the blankets all over his legs and feet, muffled up his head, and, mounting his own horse, led the way out of the temporary shelter which had been such a boon to the poor redskin, for nowhere else could a fire have been built for miles, and so good a retreat found.

On through the storm Buffalo Bill rode, the Indian pony following in the broken tracks made by the large horse, and his rider watching the muffled form ahead with strange wonder in his eyes.

The delay to save the redskin, and the heavy traveling through the storm, made it slow work, and night fell before the first cabin of Yellow Dust came in sight.

But, on pushed the scout, and a light from a cabin soon glimmered ahead. Then more lights came into view, the larger ones of the Golden Arms. The chief followed in silence wherever his rescuer cared to lead.

A few minutes more, and, riding up to a cabin, Buffalo Bill called out:

"Ho, Sule Ross, come out here, for there are two half-frozen men to care for."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DEATH HAND.

Sule Ross had closed his store and retired to his cabin with the night, for there would be no trade in such a storm.

All the people had either hunted their cabins, the saloons, or the Golden Arms for shelter.

The Colonel's Game was in full blast, fires roaring up the chimneys, with half a dozen logs the size of a man on each.

Gambling and drinking was the order of the night, and men who drank too deeply would have to content themselves upon the floor until morning, for they would not dare go to their homes.

Sule Ross heard the cry without, threw on his storm coat, and sprang to the door.

He saw two horsemen close to the cabin, and asked:

"Who are you?"

"Cody! Quick, Ross! Look to this poor fellow with me. I'll put the horses up."

"My God, Pard Bill, is it you? And again in a blizzard."

"Quick, Sule, for my companion is in a bad way, I fear. He was half dead when I found him."

The storekeeper had been looking at the muffled forms, and now at Buffalo Bill's request, he lifted the Indian in his strong arms and went with him into the cabin, the scout meanwhile riding on to the log stable near at hand to get the horses under shelter as quickly as he could.

Once in the cabin Sule Ross lay the blanketed form on the floor, then put on the kettle to boil, got out a bottle of liquor and glasses, and prepared a bed on the floor not far from the fire, placing there a bear robe and blankets.

He then drew the blankets off the form, which was seated bolt upright, and cried in amazement:

"By Heaven! it is an Indian!"

The redskin was in a semi-stupor. He seemed not to have the power of movement, and his eyes were listless in their expression.

Sule Ross forced into his lips a drink of liquor, then placed him upon the bear-robe bed, enveloped him in hot blankets, and was bustling about making coffee when Buffalo Bill, looking more like a grizzly bear than a human being, entered the cabin.

He threw off the rubber cloak he wore, then a bear-robe coat, next a storm ulster that came to his feet, drew off his arctic boots, and said:

"You see why I am not frozen, too, Sule."

"Oh, yes, but you could go out in summer clothes and be all right where another man would freeze solid in an Esquimeau suit. You'll never freeze to death, Pard Bill."

"I hope not."

"You'd make a great Arctic explorer, and—"

"Thanks! I am far enough north now to suit me. But, how is my red pard?"

"I gave him a big drink of whisky, and you had better take one, too. I'll have some coffee for you in a few minutes, and supper will follow."

"The coffee is better than liquor, in the long run. But he's mighty still. I'll take a look at him."

The Indian seemed about as when he came in. Buffalo Bill took off his outer wraps, rubbed his hands, arms, and legs, while Sule Ross forced a drink of hot whisky down his throat.

For a while it was a struggle for life, but at last the devoted care of the two men was successful, and the Indian rallied, and once on the mend, began to rapidly improve.

The drinks, warmth of the room, and care of Buffalo Bill and Sule Ross had saved him.

He gazed about him vacantly at first, then seemed to realize his position, and seeing the scout, said in a husky voice:

"Good white brother to Death Hand."

The two white men gave a glance at each other.

Death Hand! one of the most powerful of the mountain chiefs, and the bitter foe to the whites, one who was greatly feared along the whole border, especially at Yellow Dust City!

His eyes turning upon Sule Ross, he said:

"Two good white brothers. Two time save Death Hand from Happy Hunting Grounds. Red man don't forget friend or foe."

"You were in a bad way, chief, but you will be all right after a night's rest. Don't fear trouble, for you are not to be disturbed by any one. We will have some supper now."

The supper served the better to pull the chief together, and Sule Ross gave him a pipe to smoke after it.

Then a bed was made for him in the back room, which Ross used as a kitchen, and where there was a good fire, and he was soon fast asleep in the very heart of the settlement he had more than once raided with disastrous effect.

"Do you think it can be the Chief Death Hand, Bill?" asked Sule Ross, when the two were seated, talking together and enjoying their pipes.

"Oh, yes, his war bonnet is that of a great chief, and then I recognized him as soon as I got a good look at his face, for that scar across his forehead my bullet gave him a year ago in the Old Stockade Cabin fight."

"I wonder if he knows you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Where did you find him?"

Buffalo Bill told the story.

"But how came you there?"

"I am here to tell you all, Sule, for you are to be my right bower in what I have to do," and Buffalo Bill related the story of the attack on the couch, the rescue, and how he had returned to Yellow Dust for a purpose he would explain also.

"But that redskin, Bill? The boy

will surely kill him the moment they see him to-morrow."

"No, he was not captured; he was found by me, in a dying condition. I brought him here, and I shall protect him."

"I glory in your pluck, Cody, and you know I am with you, but I fear we have a big undertaking on our hands."

"We shall see," was the quiet response of the scout.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE SCOUT VIGILANTES.

"Well, Pard Bill, I hardly know what to say about you," said Sule Ross, as the two friends continued to sit before the fire, listening to the howling storm, and Buffalo Bill had just told about his having come to Yellow Dust City to unearth a band of outlaws.

"How do you mean, Sule?"

"Well, you are carrying on a winter campaign, as it were, in weather that would freeze the soul out of any other man."

"Yesterday Captain Adams, when here, very properly called you the King of the Blizzard, and you appear to be."

"First you come in with a party of prospectors from here, whose lives you saved, then you start to the fort in a blizzard, return here with General Easton and his daughter, start for the fort, save the coach from outlaws, and find their leader to be the very man who was yesterday's orator, and the whole five to have been of the prospecting outfit you saved."

"To-night you come in with a frozen chief, whom the boys here would give big money to kill."

"Now you tell me you are on the trail of more outlaws, so is it any wonder you amaze me?"

Buffalo Bill laughed, puffed slowly at his pipe, and then replied:

"Sule, you remember I told you, when I brought that outfit in, that I had a secret to tell you? Well, I am going to tell you now."

"I am all ears."

"You are about the only man in the camps I am sure I can trust."

"There are others."

"Oh, yes, but I am not yet one of them."

"Now, Colonel Camp is all right, if all goes his way; Waring is, too, and your idol here, Sunflower Sam, the Shasta Sport, is a man to tie to, it seems; but, I do not know just how their interests may be interwoven with others whom I intend to lay a heavy hand upon."

"I see. And I know many men here to depend on if it comes to trouble. You know I am one of the Secret Vigilantes. So are Colonel Camp, Waring, the sport, and others."

"How many in all?"

"There are sixty."

"Who are the officers?"

"Sunflower Sam is captain."

"A good one, from what I have heard of him."

"The colonel is next in rank; then I come, and Waring is fourth."

"An ably officered command, I should say, only your army experience should have made you leader."

"I prefer the position I have, on account of my business, while the Shasta Sport can attend to the duties in the field, having only his gambling to occupy his time."

"The people do not know just who are the vigilantes?"

"No, other than that we four, as officers, have had our say."

"You were the ones who sentenced the Blue Belts to exile?"

"Yes; for they were a hard lot."

"Caught in their crimes?"

"A number of crimes were traced to them."

"Such as murder, highway robbery, and camp crimes?"

"Yes."

"It seems from the attack on the stage

coach yesterday others might be guilty also."

"Yes; there are many more guilty ones here."

"What do you know about Scalplock Sam?"

"He is a bad one, but knows when the tide turns against him, for he has been a model man of late, would not be surprised if he wished to step into the shoes of Chin-Chin Jim as preacher."

"Yes, or as road-agent."

"That would be more to his liking, no doubt."

"Now, Sule, what I tell you is in confidence; you know."

"Wholly so, Cody."

"I trust you, as I may later the officers of the Secret Vigilantes other than yourself; but you alone I act through now."

"I understand."

"Now, tell what you know about the members of that prospecting trail that nearly ended so fatally for all?"

"Very little more than that a party of some thirty went out, got lost, became scant of food, and snowed in, and but for you would all have died."

"Do you know who they all were?"

"No; for they have had little to say about their venture."

"Ashamed of it, eh?"

"About that. Chin-Chin Jim did the speaking yesterday, but I did not observe who were with him. I do know that several have died, a couple lost a limb, and that is all."

"I can account for eleven."

"You can?" in surprise.

"Yes; there were twenty-seven in all."

"About that?"

"Just that. Two died on the trail, two more after they reached Yellow Dust City, a couple lost a limb, one an arm, the other a leg, and five attacked the coach yesterday, three of whom were killed and two are prisoners."

"By Jove, but you have got them down fine, Cody."

"I am here to know each one who was on that prospecting trail, Sule."

"I'll do what I can to help you. But, what is your object, for they were certainly very kind to you to-day?"

"Yes, very, paying the price of their lives."

"Oh, yes, and we gave the two men who had lost their limbs the purse you refused to accept. You made a great hit with the boys when you gave that money to be used for the unfortunate, Bill."

"So the two cripples got it? Well, that was right; but now, tell me, Sule, what about those Blue Belts you drove out of the camps?"

"Bill, do you know I have worried about them, for the storms coming on so much earlier this year must have got them in the mountains, and perhaps they perished."

"I did not want that, of course, and I have been inclined to hire some men and send them out with supplies to look them up, for the aim of the Secret Vigilantes was to be just, not cruel."

"Well, Sule, you made a sad mistake in sending those men off, as I will tell you," said Buffalo Bill, impressively, and his look and tone made Sule Ross feel uncomfortable.

CHAPTER XL.III.

A SWORN ALLY.

"You really distress me, Cody, for I feel that you know something about those Blue Belts," said Sule Ross.

"I do."

"Let me know, for if I can repair a wrong I have unintentionally been guilty of, I will gladly do it."

"I well know that you will, Sule."

"The fact is, the Secret Vigilantes felt that they had found a band of men at whom they could strike a severe blow as a starter in cleaning up the morals of Yellow Dust; they hit upon the best known and strongest combination of men known in the camps and exiled

them, instead of hanging them, thus showing mercy."

"Yes, so everybody said."

"The Secret Vigilantes did not know of the coming cold weather, but tabooed the Blue Belts from going to any camp or settlement up in this country."

"That was it."

"They sent messengers to warn the other camps of the Blue Belts."

"We did."

"This forced the Blue Belts into the Death Valley Mountains, where they thought they would not be followed."

"They had nerve to go there?"

"They heard gold was there, they could go nowhere else, and they sought to build a camp, winter there, and, getting supplies from elsewhere than Yellow Dust, to hunt gold there."

"You have seen them, Cody?"

"I have, for a certainty."

"You were up in the Death Valley Mountains?"

"Yes. Word was sent to the fort that the Blue Belts had been exiled, and they were described as the worst gang of cut-throats that had ever infested a mining country."

"They were not so bad as that, Bill, for I know others that are worse. It was for this reason we exiled them, knowing that we would have plenty of hanging to do if the desperadoes here did not profit by the fate of the Blue Belts."

"Well, such word came to the fort, with the suggestion that the Blue Belts would doubtless take refuge at some fort or settlement, or raid a camp."

"Yes."

"I was therefore sent out to find and watch them, perhaps warn them."

"And you found them?"

"I told you when I came here the morning of that bitter storm that I had rescued a mining party in the hills?"

"I remember."

"It was the Blue Belts."

"Ah! They were in a bad way, then?"

"The agonies those men suffered, Sule Ross, no one knows better than I. Why they were not all driven mad Heaven only knows!"

"Poor fellows! I hope you were able to help them."

"I was."

"I didn't intend that; none of us did."

"Why, Ross, I have not told you the half."

"There is more to tell?"

"This starving and freezing was but half their sufferings, Sule."

"What else could they suffer?"

"They left here fifteen strong. They now are but seven; eight are dead."

"My God! How can that be?"

"From cold, exposure, and wounds."

"Then they were in a fight?"

"No, they were tracked by a band of men, told treacherously that they had been found not guilty, after all, and could return to Yellow Dust, and then they were made prisoners."

"But by whom?"

"The party of twenty-seven alleged prospectors that left Yellow Dust City."

"Can it be possible?"

"They were followed by those men, as I have said, betrayed, and then did they suffer what few men could and live to tell the story."

"You astound me, Pard Bill, more than I can express."

"What was done to them?"

"The hand or foot of each one was cut off."

"Great God!" and Sule Ross sprang to his feet and began to excitedly pace the floor.

"Buffalo Bill, did any other man than you tell me this I would call him a most heartless liar. Can it be possible that this monstrous crime was done?"

"Worse still, Ross."

"In the name of High Heaven, what could be worse?"

"They were robbed, left only with scant clothing and food, and told to go their way to certain death, but to suffer

the torture of the damned before they died.

"I tell you, Sule Ross, it was the most revolting cruelty I ever knew of, even among Indians, and when I found those poor wretches and saw their sufferings, I took up the gauntlet for them, and I tell you now that I shall put them in the way of avenging their wrongs. Yes, and shall aid them in the just work, for those who wronged them shall suffer full punishment for their awful crime. I swear it!"

"I am their ally, so is Surgeon Frank Powell. We are pards in this campaign of vengeance!"

"And I also am with you, Pard Cody; and I swear to enter into the work with you, heart, body, and soul!" and Sule Ross brought his fist down upon the table with savage earnestness, fire flashing from his eyes.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE SPOTTERS.

When Sule Ross had listened to the whole story, he said:

"This is a most marvelous affair, Bill, and utterly upsets me. Whatever those poor devils might have been guilty of, they did not deserve such punishment. It were better to have hanged them, by far; that would have been far more merciful."

"It would, indeed."

"And to think of those men who tracked them visiting upon them such merciless fate."

"Yes, and by what authority did they pursue them?"

"True."

"They were not of your vigilante band, and your having punished the Blue Belts, who made them the executioners of still worse sentences?"

"Yes, who?"

"And who were the self-appointed executioners, Ross?"

"Ah, that is the question?"

"Yellow Dust men?"

"That, of course."

"They were the prospecting party."

"Sure."

"I can account, as I said, for eleven of them."

"Yes."

"Leaving sixteen to be ferreted out."

"We can and must find those sixteen."

"Yes, we must; but, who was their leader?"

"Those two prisoners told me that Chin-Chin Jim was."

"He was a clever fellow, deep as a well, sly as a fox, and a bad one."

"But, he was not the leader."

"You know this?"

"I did not see their faces very well, for they kept them muffled, even when eating their supper; but Chin-Chin Jim had not the voice of the leader of the expedition."

"You ought to know; but could not the Blue Belts help you spot them by what they saw?"

"Their torturers were all masked, you remember."

"Yes, yes. They therefore could be of little help; so now we must do it all here. I believe we can spot each one, Bill; in fact, I know we can."

"It must be done quietly, not to let them think they are suspected."

"Yes, or they'll raise sheol in the camp to cover up their devilment."

"We must spot them one by one."

"I will fix upon a man I suspect, let you know, and you can verify as best you can if he is one of the gang."

"I will do that. We must find them out, one by one, and when we know them, I shall act. I shall give out that I am here awaiting dispatches which General Easton is to send back. That will account for my being here, and I will remain here with you."

"All right. During the day many men come to my store, about half the camps, on one errand or another, and you can loaf in there and see them all."

"Then you can drop in at the Golden Arms and have a look at the faces and at night we will go to the Colonel's Game, and there you have the whole outfit."

"All right, that will be my plan. But, about reporting the hold-up?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, Bob White will be in while I am here, doubtless, and he will have to report it to Colonel Camp."

"That is so."

"Should he not come, some man from the stations eastward may come in after supplies and tell it; so I think I had better tell the colonel in the morning that Captain Adams, after he left, became anxious to know if the general and his daughter were getting along all right, so had me guide him across to the Stage Trail, and after the coach."

"Just it."

"And we came upon a hold-up, killed three of the masked road-agents, and took two prisoners."

"Captain Adams then went on to the fort, while I was sent here to report, and also await dispatches from the general."

"That will account for your being here."

"Then that is settled?"

"Yes, but one thing troubles me—that redskin!"

"Ah, I had forgotten him. Well, I shall tell the truth about him, that I found him freezing on the trail, brought him here, and will let him go as soon as the way is open for him to reach his village in the mountains."

"The boys won't have it, I much fear. Can't we keep him in hiding, Bill, and let him slip away after the storm, for I will give him a big horse and plenty of supplies and blankets, and you can't lose him."

"No, I am not ashamed of befriending a foe, and it may make a friend of him."

"I shall protect him, Sule, from any man or set of men who attempt to harm him."

"And I am with you, and will rally the vigilantes."

"Let me get better acquainted with the vigilantes, first, Sule."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I feel certain that you have spies in the band, no matter how carefully you may have selected your men."

"It may be."

"I therefore wish to know first who I am trusting."

"You are right in that, Cody."

"If there is trouble about the chief, the good men will rally to my support without asking them to do so, and the bad will take the other tack."

"Very true."

"Now tell me if you know of a good surgeon in the camps?"

"Old Rhubarb."

"Has he been away?"

"Not a day."

"He is not the man, for those limbs of the Blue Belts were amputated by an expert."

"I know of no other."

"We'll find him, never fear."

"Now let us turn in, for I've done a good day's work."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE FATAL WAR-TRAIL.

The morning broke with the storm still raging, but Buffalo Bill was willing to rest indoors after his late adventures and hardships.

His anxiety about Captain Adams and his soldiers was considerable, and yet he felt that Lem Todd had been able to guide the command to the stockade cabin, and if so, they were safe, though snow-bound, while the officer was too thorough a soldier to risk leaving there without cause for it.

At the fort he knew that the anxiety for the general and all would be great, but the return of the captain would allay those fears.

The Indian chief still felt what he had

gone through with the day before, for he made no effort to leave his bed until Buffalo Bill called him to breakfast.

He arose, stiff in every joint, but a "bracer" and good breakfast helped him amazingly, and he was told to go back to his blankets and take it quietly, which he seemed glad to do.

He again expressed his gratitude to his preservers, and called them both his "paleface brothers."

During the morning Buffalo Bill went in, and, handing him a pipe of tobacco, sat down before the fire to have a talk with him.

The scout was anxious to find out just what the Death Hand was doing so far from his village alone.

He knew that the chief had seen much of the palefaces, had spent one winter with his people at one of the forts, but to break out at war again when the spring came.

The chief had, therefore, learned much from the whites, had fitted out his people splendidly with blankets and clothing, and a prisoner who had escaped from him reported that Death Hand's village was a perfect stronghold in the mountains, that the Indians had built cabins for their winter quarters, had thousands of ponies, cattle, sheep, and goats in the mountain valleys adjacent, and were a rich, powerful, yet bitterly hostile tribe to the whites.

Why then, was the Death Hand away from his people and at such a time, save to see if a raid could not be made upon Yellow Dust City.

Such was the idea of the scout, and he wished to get at the truth of it if he could, by interviewing the chief.

When he had smoked awhile, Buffalo Bill asked the chief how he felt.

He knew that the Indians always went slow about a pow-wow, and he did not care to show any impatience.

The Death Hand replied that he felt fairly well, and could go away on his pony if the scout wished.

That was the chance of Buffalo Bill to tell him, in his own tongue, which he spoke fluently, and imitating the Indian style of speaking, that the palefaces never abused a foe, if they had a good heart, only those with black hearts doing so, and he had in mind the fact that some of the rough fellows at Yellow Dust City might make trouble in their desire to kill the Indian.

He went on to say that the Indian chief had been found by him, unable to protect himself, that had it been otherwise they would doubtless have fought each other.

But, the Death Hand had come as his guest into the village of the palefaces; he should remain until he was thoroughly well, and the storm was over, and then he, Buffalo Bill, and his good friend, Sule Ross, would fit him out with a big horse, load his pony with blankets and provisions, and let him go his way to his people.

The scout further added that he would see the Death Hand well on his trail, that no paleface with a black heart should kill him from behind a rock.

The chief seemed deeply moved and much pleased by the scout's words, and was evidently pondering some momentous reply in his mind, for he said several times that he would talk later.

Then Buffalo Bill went on to say that the palefaces were bitter toward him, because he was their foe, and some of them might try to show their anger; but he was to remain in the cabin until he felt well, and then keep close by him until he was ready to go.

There was no fear in the brave chief's face as he replied:

"Me stay with Great White Chief, but Death Hand no afraid to die."

"I can well believe that; but, why was it the great chief was alone and so far from his people?"

"Death Hand did not come alone."

"Are any of your young men about?"

The Indian nodded.

"Then they have suffered terribly, and

I will go to them with the Death Hand, with supplies," quickly said the scout.

The Death Hand shook his head. "Are you afraid for me to go, for, remember, I may save them."

"All dead."

"Dead!"

"All dead," said the chief, sadly.

"But where?"

"In snow."

"Where are they?"

"Long way."

"How many of them?"

The chief held up both hands three times.

"Thirty! This is terrible," cried Buffalo Bill, and by close questioning he got out of the chief that he had started with thirty of his braves to see if he could not, later, make a raid upon Yellow Dust City with a large force.

They had been caught in the storm, had found what shelter they could, but when it was over they were in a terrible plight, frost-bitten and some of them dying.

Their provisions became scarce, and when the second storm came, his young men had died like wild flowers under the chilling winds.

In vain did he try to save them, for strange to say, he had not been frost-bitten, and remained strong.

It showed him that the Great Spirit had frowned upon his intended war upon the palefaces, by killing his young men, and saving him to go back and tell his people.

When he was left alone he had killed the ponies that remained, and driven, to save his own life, to leave his young men, he had started, become bewildered, wandered about, and had the scout not found him he, too, would have died.

Buffalo Bill listened to the plaintive story, and then said:

"Your young men shall not remain to be food for the coyotes. I will get volunteers to-night to go with me, and to-morrow we will start for the place and bury the braves where they fell."

CHAPTER XLVI.

TROUBLE HATCHING.

The expression that came over the stern, stolid face of the Indian chief at Buffalo Bill's promise to keep the coyotes from feeding upon his young men told plainly that the inmost soul of the red man was touched.

He could appreciate fully that the man, for whose scalp he had so longed, the great scout who had been the dread of his bravest warriors, was his friend, if only he allowed him to be.

He did not speak, he simply arose, took the scout's hand in both his own, and pressed it hard.

Soon after he said that he would guide the scout to the bodies, that they were about two hours' pony ride from Yellow Dust City, showing that they had gotten dangerously near the camps in their scouting trail.

A good dinner and the fact that he no longer felt dread of Buffalo Bill, caused the chief to recuperate rapidly, and looking out at the weather, he said, with the air of a weather prophet:

"Storm go soon; bright up there when dark come."

This showed that his idea was that the stars would be visible.

"Yes; and it will be as cold as Greenland," said Sule Ross, who added, quickly:

"Here comes a gang of men."

He opened the door for them and invited them in.

There were five of them, and had come for him to open the store and sell them some buffalo robes and blankets.

They eyed the Indian curiously, asked Buffalo Bill what brought him back, and followed Sule Ross into the store to make their purchases.

He let them out the store door, and returned in half an hour, to report that the presence of Death Hand would be all over the camp by night.

"They seem to think we are hiding him here, and when I told them who he was, boldly said that they would let the people know."

"I told them then that you intended to bring them up to the colonel's at night, and ask for men to go with you to-morrow to bury his dead braves."

"That was the very thing to tell them, Sule, and I will take him up with me to-night."

"I'll be there, and I hope there will not be trouble."

"So do I," was the quiet reply, and then, glancing out of the window, Buffalo Bill continued:

"The storm is over, Sule."

After a good supper the Indian chief expressed perfect willingness to go with the scout, Sule Ross having opened his store for sales, but promised to be on hand at the Colonel's Game.

He gave Buffalo Bill a hint that men in the store had talked angrily about Death Hand being in camp, and the scout replied:

"I shall take the bull by the horns at the outset and stand no nonsense, Sule."

"I know that, and it is best; but, look out for a fellow known as Scalplock Sam, for he is a bad one, and he has four equally as bad backers."

"I'll keep an eye on Scalplock, Sule," was the reply.

Soon after, with the Indian decorated in his war bonnet, Buffalo Bill started through the snow to the Golden Arms.

The colonel met him most cordially, asked why he had not come to the Golden Arms as his guest, and then listened with intense surprise to his report of the attack on the coach by Chin-Chin Jim and four comrades.

"We missed him, yet supposed he was snowed in at some of the cabins. But you astound me, Mr. Cody, at what you tell me, for I did not regard him as a road-agent. The Secret Vigilantes must look sharp."

"Why, this will give Yellow Dust City a bad black eye, to have a general of the army attacked, and with his daughter, too. It is too bad, too bad, and it shall be made known in the Game to-night."

"Yes, it should be, for, as you say, the Secret Vigilantes will have to look sharp, for there are still a few bad men left in Yellow Dust, after getting rid of the Blue Belts."

"So there are, and, do you know, I am getting anxious about those Blue Belts, in this awful weather, for we did not wish to kill them, Mr. Cody."

"You may be well anxious, colonel, in such weather for any one exposed to it."

"I am, I am. But, about that Indian?"

"Well?"

"What about his being the Chief Death Hand?"

"He is Death Hand."

"The boys will wish to kill him."

"If you have any influence with them you had best advise them that they better not, that he is in the keeping of a Government officer, who is fully capable of taking care of him."

"I will, I will. But, he is a bad one, very bad one, Mr. Cody."

"I am not defending his morals, or his right to kill palefaces; but he is an Indian, one whom I found nearly dead, and I brought him to Yellow Dust."

"Better not take him into the Game, Mr. Cody."

"It is just where I shall take him, for I intend to go there to call for volunteers to go with me to bury his dead braves."

"I am not trying to hide the Indian, Colonel Camp, from a lot of cowards who feared to fight him openly, but now would be glad to kill him, that he is in their power."

"You have got nerve, Mr. Cody, and that wins. I am, of course, your backer in case of trouble, and so will others be."

"Thanks. I hope that there will be no trouble, but if it comes I will meet it as best I can," and, turning to Death Hand, who had stood a motionless as a

bronze statue, Buffalo Bill spoke to him in his own tongue, and the two started for the Colonel's Game Saloon.

But, though his face was immovable, Death Hand had understood enough of what was said to fully comprehend his position, and the scout's.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AN EXCITING SCENE.

The storm being over, the Colonel's Saloon was pretty well crowded.

Men living at a distance had been storm-bound, and were glad to get up to the stores to buy something, and to the saloons to "take something." Gamblers were also in full sway.

Buffalo Bill entered in his quiet way, the Indian following; and following the Indian came the colonel, for he was determined to be on hand if wanted.

Carl Waring was there, also, and Sule Ross had gone direct to the saloon from his store, leaving his partner in charge there.

There, too, was the Man-from-Shasta, engaged in a game with several others for big stakes.

Scalplock Sam likewise was there, and looking his best.

He had been making ugly remarks about the Indian being in town, and what should be done with him.

His four comrades were keeping close to him, too, as though told to be on hand if wanted.

There were honest miners and bad ones, toughs and still worse than toughs, all in the saloon.

Fully three hundred men were gathered there, and a loud hum of voices was heard by the scout before he reached the door.

As he entered the door a voice said:

"Thar he is now!"

A dead silence followed.

"And ther Injun is with him," added another voice.

Every eye was turned upon Buffalo Bill first, then upon the Indian.

The scout paused to look around for a seat.

"Here, Mr. Cody, join me."

It was the colonel, and Buffalo Bill turned and took the seat at Colonel Camp's table.

The Indian also sat down, as Buffalo Bill gave him a chair.

Glancing about, Buffalo Bill nodded to several familiar faces, and the look showed him Sule Ross, Waring, and others whom he felt belonged to the best of the citizens.

Scalplock Sam arose and started toward the scout, but Colonel Camp called out:

"Gentlemen, I have something to say."

All was attention. Of course, he was going to explain the presence of the Indian chief there.

"I am sorry to say that the blow we visited upon the Blue Belts, in driving the band from our midst, was not enough to give others a warning to keep them from crime, for a monstrous wrong has been done almost at our very doors."

Every eye was upon the colonel. He was always glad to make a speech, and improved every opportunity to do so.

"I wish to tell you that this gentleman, whom you all know as Buffalo Bill, and whom you are aware is the King of Bordermen, and who was so honored yesterday by the present of a bag of gold, presented by those whose lives he had saved—this great scout, I say, who gave that gold to those in need, arrived last night in the driving blizzard, to report to me that five road-agents from this camp had held up Bob White's stage to rob General Easton and his beautiful daughter.

"But, gentlemen, that dashing officer, Captain Adams, anxious for the safety of his general, took the trail of the coach, Buffalo Bill guiding, and arrived in time to kill three of the road-robbers and capture the other two."

"Who four of those men were. Mr. Cody does not know, but the leader was none other than Chin-Chin Jim."

A roar of surprise went up at this, and a voice called out:

"Who be killed?"

"He was, and this great scout went back to report to me, as agent of the stage line, and to await here return dispatches from the general, and gladly we welcomed him into our midst, and we trust while he is here he will be able to report to us the citizens of Yellow Dust dealt with road-agents and outlaws, for the Secret Vigilantes must on to work to clear the atmosphere of crime once more."

"Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention, and it will be soon known who these other four road-agents were, for we can spot them."

This speech of the colonel created the wildest excitement. Men talked loud and wildly, and it could be seen that many guesses were being made as to who were the other four men.

The better class of citizens denounced the attack on the coach, and there were others who did so whom many knew would only get their just deserts when hanged.

The Shasta Sport had his say, and it was to this point:

"There will have to be a meeting here before the rough ones will learn that the Secret Vigilantes are in deadly earnest to make Yellow Dust City a better place."

The secret to be the sentiment of many.

Carl Waring denounced the outlaws and Sible Ross quietly said:

"Spot the desperadoes, and then hang them."

For some time the excitement continued, the men forgetting to gamble, but not to drink.

The Indian chief stolidly regarded the scene, doubtless thinking it worse than a war-dance of his braves.

Buffalo Bill sat unmoved, but an interested looker-on.

Suddenly a voice cried for order.

It was Scalplock Sam, and a silence at once followed, for all saw that the man had "blood in his eye."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CALM TO VIOLENCE.

When Scalplock Sam arose to express an opinion he was never disputed the floor.

In spite of his change about, when he had trouble with the sport, he had not lost his hold upon the men of Yellow Dust, as far as cowering them was concerned, for many kept quiet rather than be drawn into trouble with such a person.

His cry for "order" was instantly recognized.

But for the fact that the saloon had a dirt flooring, the proverbial pin might have been heard to drop.

Scalplock looked wicked. He had worked himself up to fever heat about the Indian chief being in Yellow Dust. He had strengthened his intentions by several very stiff drinks, and so was ready to make a greater name or mar the one he had, if that were possible.

His eyes were upon Buffalo Bill, though he addressed the unshakable.

"Gent, I has a word to say," he fairly roared.

"Out with it, then, Sam," said the colonel, who was by courtesy master of ceremonies in the saloon.

"That gent yonder, whom we all know is the King of Scouts," Scalplock did not wish to belittle a man he intended to master, "nobody dares to dispute me. I say that gent has a perfect right to protect stage-coaches, shoot road-agents, and all that, but he has no right ter insult thar citizens of thar camp thar way he has."

All eyes turned upon Buffalo Bill, who asked quietly, without rising from his seat:

"In what way have I insulted the citizens of Yellow Dust?"

"You have brought inter our midst a Injun chief, thar foar of thar houses and fire-side of Yellow Dust, thar skulk-

ing scoundrel that has kill our citizens, burned our cabin, run off our stock, and—"

"Without waiting to break in upon your very eloquent speech, Scalplock Sam, I will admit all you say to save argument: he is an Indian and ought in an Injin, say. He is here. I brought him here, and what are you going to do about it?"

For a moment Scalplock was at a loss, but he rallied quickly and cried:

"That man has scalped hundreds of our people!"

It was an unfortunate remark, for just came Buffalo Bill's reply.

"And you, a white man, wear as your belt the scalps of the men you claim to have killed. You also appear to be in the scalping business."

A yell greeted this reply, and for an instant the rough was taken aback.

But, he came to the attack again with:

"I am a white man, and as such I object ter you bringin' the redskin inter this camp."

"I found him in almost a dying condition by the side of the trail. He was so far gone that he could no resist me, as he otherwise would have done. I built a fire, gave him some liquor, wrapped him up, and brought him here, when Sible Ross, and I again had a struggle to save his life."

"Then we did, and I find that he is Death Hand, the great chief of the mountain tribes. He was out with a party of thirty braves on a scout, got caught in the blizzard, and every one but him is perished."

"I came here to-night to ask for a dozen brave men to go with me to carry those dead."

"Treat this chief right; bury those dead braves of his; send him back to his people our friend, and you will have saved many lives a year hence."

"That is my explanation, and I make it to the gentlemen present."

There was a decided way in which Buffalo Bill addressed gentlemen, and many observed it.

His explanation was well received, and the colonel said:

"You can easily get the men, Mr. Cody."

"But, I is not satisfied," roared Scalplock Sam.

"Do you address yourself to me?" asked the scout.

"I do."

"Then I do not care whether you are satisfied or not."

"I tell you, pard, that Injun has got ter die."

Sharp came the reply of the scout:

"No one disputes that fact, but you will have no hand in his taking off."

"But I will."

Buffalo Bill looked the ruffian squarely in the eyes as he answered:

"This chief is in my keeping, and as a Government officer I warn you not to interfere with him or me."

"When he was on the warpath, with his warriors at his back, you were lurking in your cabin; but now he is lone, alone, you wish to murder him."

"But I warn you off, and upon your head be th' responsibility if you dare lay hands upon him."

CHAPTER XLIX.

TOO QUIET FOR THEM.

The men in the saloon had been watchful, yet quiet. All knew that Buffalo Bill had right on his side.

There were few present, however, who would not have liked to see the Indian chief killed. They did fear him; they had suffered at his hands; now was the time to get revenge.

But, Buffalo Bill had brought him there, and Buffalo Bill was a Government officer.

His argument none could dispute that were fair minded, that now was the time to make a friend of the great chief.

But the trouble some element wanted |

excitement, as they called Scalplock Sam on.

Encouraged by the whispers about him, he said:

"I, for one, don't heed yer warning, Buffalo Bill."

"Then you, for one, will have cause to regret not doing so."

"Does yer expect ter scare me?"

"I cannot understand that any one man should be afraid of another. I am not built that way."

"I don't want no trouble with a Government officer, though yer honor Buffalo Bill has no terrors for me; but I talk yer now that I intends ter save th' Injun this night."

This was an avowed challenge. How would Buffalo Bill take it?

His reply was in the same uninvited tones in which he had before spoken:

"Here he is; come and take him; only come, nigger, that I shall try to protect him."

"That means that it's between you and me."

"As you please."

"I'll drop th' Injun and then attend to you."

"As you please."

Scalplock drew his revolver.

To the surprise of those about him, when Buffalo Bill rose from his seat he already had his weapon in his hand.

As the scout rose Death Hand did the same. Calm, wholly unaffected by his surroundings, the Indian chief faced his foe. He held no weapon, shown none.

The crowd could but admire the splendid nerve.

"Does you intend ter shoot me if I pulls trigger on th' redskin?" demanded Scalplock.

"No."

"I thought yer didn't."

"I intend to kill you if you make a move to fire at him."

Scalplock was a little nonplussed at this.

The scout had his revolver in better position to use it quickly than had the camp terror.

So the rough said:

"Then it seems I must down you first, th' redskin afterward."

"As you please. It is a matter of indifference to either th' chief or myself which dies first."

The crowd laughed, and Scalplock was but the more disconcerted.

The colonel, Sible Ross, and Carl Waring were watching the situation with painful interest. The colonel was fearful that the scout might be killed in his saloon, and he dreaded the result. Yet he dared not interfere in the quarrel where but two men faced each other.

Carl Waring was anxious to see Scalplock Sam killed, and he cherished the idea that the scout was the man to do it.

Sible Ross was more nervous than had he been in Buffalo Bill's shoes. He loved the scout as a brother, and he knew that Scalplock was a very dangerous foe.

Still, the storekeeper had confidence in Buffalo Bill's ability to take care of himself. He knew by the calmness of the scout that he was in a dangerous humor, though he never would shoot to kill a man unless driven to it.

The Shasta Sport, from his point of vantage, was watching affairs like a lynx. He would be on hand when needed, all who knew him were certain.

But he, too, would not interfere where it was man against man.

"Does yer dare face me square, man ter man?"

"We are facing each other now."

"Answer my question, for I don't want nobdy innocent hurt."

"Oh, I won't hurt any one; I'll send my bullet right where I aim it."

"Will yer face me at th' drop of a hat?"

"I see no reason to do so. I want no trouble. You say you will kill this chief and I say you will not. That is all there is to it."

"Then I—"

With the words Scalplock threw his revolver forward.

Some said his aim was at the Indian; some said it was at Buffalo Bill.

No one but himself really knew, except Buffalo Bill.

Quick as he was, and trying to catch the scout off his guard, the terror did not get his revolver to a level before there came a report.

It was from the scout's revolver.

It had been aimed sure.

The bullet took the desperado between the eyes.

There was a wild war-whoop that nearly raised the roof.

It brought every man to his feet.

But, it was only Death Hand expressing his admiration.

Instantly he relaxed into his former immovable calm.

Scalplock Sam fell backward into the arms of his four comrades, rewarding one for his faithfulness by sending a bullet into his heart, for the nervous death-clutch on the trigger fired the weapon as it fell from his hand.

The other three were horrified, but they dropped the two bodies and turned to face the crowd, to take a hand in the trouble to avenge their leader and comrade.

CHAPTER L.

A STRANGE BURIAL.

The three companions of the dead desperado turned to face Buffalo Bill, to see that he was ready for them.

They saw, too, that the crowd, rejoicing in the death of the terror, would stand no nonsense from them.

They could have counted their backers a moment before by dozens; but now there had been a surprising change, and not a half dozen nodded encouragement to them.

"Come, no more of this.

"Put up your guns, or I'll take a hand!"

It was the Man-from-Shasta who spoke.

The toughs thought it best to obey, though one of them remarked:

"He kilt our pard, sport, and poor Sam, in his death-agony, kilt his best friend."

"Say no more, or there'll be more sudden deaths in the same outfit," assumed Sunflower, and seeing that the temper of the crowd was dangerous the three began to look after their dead comrades.

Buffalo Bill had resumed his seat, the Indian chief following his example.

Sule Ross had pressed forward and said:

"In your usual style, Cody."

"He brought it upon himself, Sule."

"He did. You were very patient with him."

"There'll be no more trouble, I hope."

"Not a bit."

Carl Waring came up and said:

"You deserve the name you bear as a dead shot, Mr. Cody. It was square between the eyes."

"Two birds with one shot, say I, as Sam killed his pard in falling. You are the quickest hand I ever saw with a weapon, sir," added the colonel, while the Shasta Sport came up and said:

"I wish to make your better acquaintance, sir, and to say that you have done Yellow Dust City a great service, for that man was one of the worst characters in the mines."

"I would rather have left him to the Secret Vigilantes, sir, to care for; but he was as determined to kill the chief here as I am determined to protect him."

"You did right, sir, and there shall be no more trouble about the Indian."

"But, what nerve he displayed, for he must have known the trouble was about him."

"He speaks English, sir," and he turned to Death Hand, whose eyes were fixed wistfully upon the scalps of Scalplock Sam and his comrade, who were just then being borne out of the cabin, passing within a few feet of him.

"By Jove, he's longing for their scalps!"

"I only wish he had them," laughed the colonel, who continued:

"Sunflower Sam, Mr. Cody, will go with you to bury those braves, and will make up a party for you."

"I thank you, sir, exceedingly. It will have a good effect on the chief, and that means his people, also."

"It will, indeed. How many will you wish?"

"A dozen, for the chief and I will go, also."

"I will have them ready at dawn, with a pack horse carrying picks and shovels," was the sport's answer.

This duty accomplished, and having shown his intention and ability to protect the chief, Buffalo Bill turned to leave the saloon, calling upon the crowd to drink at his expense.

The feeling was unanimous to do so.

The comrades of Scalplock Sam heard the invitation as they reached the door, and returned with great alacrity to also accept the scout's hospitality!

They wished to show that they had no "hard feelings" toward a man who could use a revolver as did Buffalo Bill, and had only done his duty.

"No hard feelings, pard," they said, as they raised their glasses, dashed off enough for their two dead comrades, as well as themselves, and then continued on in their mournful duty of carrying the bodies to their cabin.

Sule Ross accompanied Buffalo Bill and the chief from the saloon, and when they were safe in the cosy cabin of the storekeeper, Death Hand turned, grasped the hand of the scout, and said:

"Heap quick shoot! heap dead shoot! Great white chief mighty man—brother of Death Hand!"

Buffalo Bill and the chief were ready the next morning when the Shasta Sport and a dozen followers rode up to the cabin, leading a pack horse with food, kindling wood, picks, and shovels.

It was bitter cold but clear, and Death Hand rode to the front as guide, Buffalo Bill and the sport riding side by side.

The ride was about two hours, and the bodies were found, thirty in number, the coyotes just beginning to gather for a feast, having lost too much time, as is their custom, whining over it, and so losing their meal.

A spot was selected, a large, round grave dug, the bodies placed in it, in a sitting posture, facing each other.

Their weapons, and equipments taken from their dead ponies, were placed in the grave with them, a fire was built in the centre, to warm them on the trail to the Happy Hunting Grounds, Buffalo Bill arranging all as he knew was the Indian custom, for the chief would not ask it.

That he appreciated it could be seen.

Then the grave was filled in, and stones were brought and piled in cave shape upon it.

This done, dinner was eaten, and the trail taken back to Yellow Dust City.

Back to the cabin of Sule Ross went Buffalo Bill and the chief, and when the storekeeper came in, later, to supper, the scout said:

"Well, Sule, I have spotted ten of the band that followed the Blue Belts!"

CHAPTER LI.

SPOTTED.

Before retiring that night of the return from the funeral, Buffalo Bill asked Death Hand how he felt about returning to his people.

He knew that the Indian was anxious to go, and, what was more, he intended to accompany him quite a distance upon his trail.

The chief's face showed his pleasure at being able to return. He was wholly well, and could go back and show his people that he still lived. He would have to tell them how his braves had perished, but that would add new lustre to his fame, that he should escape.

In truth, he had much, very much, to tell his people. He had met the man he had regarded as his worst foe, and found him to be his best friend. He had been treated as a brother by the pale-faces. All this he could say upon his return.

Having decided to start, Buffalo Bill said:

"You see, Sule, I still believe that there are men here who mean mischief to the chief."

"So do I."

"They would not do it openly, but they would kill him if they got a chance."

"I am sure of it."

"If he attempted to leave the camp alone he would be shot, and no one would know who did the deed."

"That is so."

"Now, I will go on with him to where he strikes up into the mountains, and he can get along all right from there, while it will not be bad going for we to go where my crippled crew are encamped."

"I see."

"I will carry them some more supplies from your store, and I will tell them that I have discovered ten of their foes—in fact, can account for eleven, and know where to put my hand upon ten more."

"You are sure of these ten men?"

"Yes, sure."

"It was quick work."

"I keep my eyes open, Sule, and have spotted these men, beyond a doubt!"

"And I can spot the other six."

"You must do more, Sule."

"How?"

"You don't know the men I have spotted?"

"No."

"Then spot the sixteen, so there can be no mistake."

"Yes, in one way and another I can find them out, never fear, each and all of them."

"Do so. Jot down their names and have them so you can point them out to me at a moment's notice."

"You see I take more supplies to my crippled crew now, because I do not wish to make another midwinter trip up there. I desire to give them all they need, and when the spring comes, and I am sure it will break early, as it began so long ahead of time, I will go from the fort with Surgeon Powell, carry horses for the outfit, and come here."

"To Yellow Dust?"

"Yes."

"You and Surgeon Powell?"

"All of us."

"Not the crippled outfit, also?"

"Yes, all."

"Bill, you will be taking big chances."

"I think not. I shall arrive by night, come direct to you here, keep the Blue Belts hidden, and you can show the doctor and myself each man you have spotted."

"I see."

"I will compare notes, get the people together, and denounce the outrage, demanding the surrender of the guilty, or there will be quick work with revolvers, and no one to surrender."

"Go ahead your own way, Cody, for you don't often go wrong."

"That is my present plan, Sule. I may change it afterward. Now, I'll tell you what I want for the Blue Belts, and you can fit the chief out with a couple of pack horses and charge it to me."

"The camps will pay for it, not you," was the reply, and Sule Ross put down the list as Buffalo Bill called it off.

He gave to the chief a rifle and pair of revolvers, clothes, blankets, and provisions in plenty to last him and his family a long time, with pipes and tobacco, a fine saddle and bridle for his own use, and all else that would please the Indian's fancy.

The two pack horses were well laden, and a third animal was given the chief, who was also to take his own pony along.

Two horses were likewise well laden for Buffalo Bill, and it was decided to

start just before dawn, so as to get clear of the cabins before the men turned out.

A good night's rest and the start was made, the weather being terribly cold; but, wrapped up as they were, neither the scout nor the Indian chief felt it.

A farewell to Sule Ross, and they were off, the snow singing under the hoofs of their horses, and all Yellow Dust City asleep.

CHAPTER LII.

SUSPICIOUS TRACKS.

Buffalo Bill led the way, leading his two pack horses.

The Indian chief followed, with his two packs and pony in lead.

The Golden Arms was passed, the colonel's saloon, and a large group of cabins. There were signs of life in but few.

On they went, the cabins growing less frequent, until, after a couple of miles, the last one was left behind.

The trail was the same that Buffalo Bill had led the band of twenty-seven into Yellow Dust by.

The gray of dawn was upon them, however, before they reached the last cabin, and Buffalo Bill's keen gaze was upon the trail.

He saw that it had been broken just beyond the last cabin!

There were the tracks of horses, three in number, he saw after inspection.

The scout at once said:

"This is suspicious, chief."

"Trail?"

"Yes, new trail."

"Three pony; go our trail; mean bad!"

"You are reading well, chief; they do mean bad. There is nothing to call men on this trail out of Yellow Dust City in this weather."

The chief nodded.

"These tracks are only an hour or so old.

"There are three horses, and Scalplock Sam had three pards left. They evidently saw Sule Ross making up the packs last night in his store, surmised that you were to start this morning, concluded that you would go before day, so went out to meet you."

The chief again nodded.

"A mile from here over that ridge is the very place for an ambush. The trail winds around a cedar thicket, in the edge of which is a group of boulders, and there they are."

"Good place."

"Oh, yes, for them, and for us, for we can strike through this canyon, get in the rear of the thicket, leave our horses, and come up behind the three men."

"Heap so, Big Chief."

With this the scout turned off the trail leading over the ridge, rode through a canyon that cut it in twain, and then toward a pine thicket.

Here the horses were left, and on foot the scout and the Indian went through the thicket until near its edge.

There were the boulders, as Buffalo Bill had said, and a voice suddenly called out:

"Git out, Tom, and see if yer see 'em coming, fer I'll bet big money ther scout is with ther red."

"If he do be?"

"Plug him, too, for we kin git back afore Yellow Dust is a stirrin', and the coyotes will make short work of ther bodie!"

The man Tom walked out to the edge of the pines and called back:

"I don't see 'em yit."

"Hands up, there!"

There were yell of fright, alarm, and a Buffalo Bill sprang down from a rock, he confronted the man who had gone into the trail and who was too dazed to know what to do.

"Surrender, or you an' under!"

Up went the hand, and he cried:

"Don't shoot, pard, for we hain't real agents, but just hunting."

"You hunting that Indian chief life and mine. Come, you have got to take

the news back to Yellow Dust that you made a failure in your assassin act."

With this the scout disarmed the man and led him into the thicket.

The fellow turned more deathly pale and shuddered as he saw his two comrades. Both were dead; near them stood the Indian chief.

His wistful gaze was upon their heads, and he was raising their scalplocks, in his mind.

"Bring their horses here, chief," ordered the scout.

The three horses were brought from back in the thicket.

"Mount, sir!"

The man obeyed. Instantly he was bound securely to his saddle, and his hands tied behind his back.

Buffalo Bill then drew off his heavy gloves, and, fishing a pencil and slip of paper out of his pocket, he wrote:

"To

"Colonel Camp,
"Golden Arms.

"I send you a prisoner and two dead men.

"They will be readily recognized as the pards of the late Scalplock Sam.

"They discovered that I was to leave this morning with the Indian, so went out ahead to ambush us, and I heard from their own lips that they intended to kill us both.

"We thwarted them.

"Sincerely yours,
"William F. Cody,
"Buffalo Bill,

"Chief of Army Scouts."

This was pinned upon the breast of the prisoner; then the bodies of the two dead men were strapped upon their horses, the three animals were then tied together with a lariat, and, taken into the trail, were started back to Yellow Dust.

They seemed anxious to get there, which was more than the bound prisoner was, for he had dim forebodings that the Secret Vigilantes might wish to interview him.

"Just a half hour's delay, chief; but we'll push along rapidly now and warm up ourselves and our horses," said Buffalo Bill, and, mounting, they set off at a gallop, for it was open traveling then for miles.

CHAPTER LIII.

QUICK RETRIBUTION.

The man whose face was turned toward Yellow Dust City, and who had not the power to check his horse, or remove the placard Buffalo Bill had placed upon his breast, was truly in a dangerous predicament.

If he happened to first meet a friend he might escape dire vengeance; but the chances were that he would first come upon those who were not his friends; he was pretty sure to ride against a member of the Secret Vigilantes.

His two dead pards, strapped over their saddles, were an appalling reminder of what might be in store for him.

On he went. The first cabin was passed. At the next some men gazed curiously at him, but he was undisturbed.

The horses kept direct on the trail, and the trail led up to the centre of the camps.

Could he not halt them? Could he not turn them off at the trail leading to his own cabin?

Had he done so he would have found cold comfort there.

The body of Scalplock Sam and that of his dead comrade were there, and no watcher stood guard over the dead, for the three had gone to kill the Indian chief.

Nearing the turn-off the bound rider tried by word and movement to induce the horses to go that way.

As it was their home, they might have done so, but a group of miners came along the trail going to their work. They

struck into the main trail before the three horses reached the one their rider wished them to take.

With amazement they gazed upon the coming horses, tried to head them off, and, in doing so, started them into a run.

The scared animals dashed by them and kept straight on up to the centre of the camps.

The miners followed on the run. Others came out of their cabins and joined in the chase.

At last, the horses halted, at the cabin of Sule Ross. He caught them, glanced at the placard, and said:

"Biter bitten, eh? I'll take you to the colonel."

He led the strange outfit to the Golden Arms, and the trail was now full of miners who had followed the grim cavalcade.

"Ho, Ross, what have you there?"

It was the Sport from Shasta who asked the question, and being up so early, it appeared as though he had not been to bed.

"This man has a letter for Colonel Camp," answered Sule Ross.

"It doubtless contains interesting news. I'll join you," the sport announced.

The colonel came out of the Golden Arms as the storekeeper arrived, leading the horses.

"A letter for you, colonel."

"Where is it, Ross?"

"That man has it."

"Give it to me, my man—why, bless my soul, he is bound, and—why, those men are dead."

"Yes, the horses brought them to my cabin, and I saw that the letter was to you, so led them over."

"It is one of Scalplock Sam's men!"

"The whole three are. I guess the quintette has but one representative now, colonel."

The colonel pulled the paper from the breast of the man, who was as pale as a corpse.

He read it, then said:

"Listen to this, my friends."

Over a hundred men were about the tavern—all impatient to know the meaning of what they saw before them, to know what story that paper told.

In a loud, distinct voice the colonel read the lines written to him by Buffalo Bill, and a loud murmur ran through the crowd.

"This is a case for the Secret Vigilantes, colonel."

"I think so, Sam."

"No need of a trial."

"None."

"Buffalo Bill's letter condemns him and sentences him."

"Certainly."

"Let us hang him, then," and the Shasta Sport spoke in a matter-of-fact way that was terrible to the poor wretch.

"I hardly think Buffalo Bill could have wished his letter thus construed," said Sule Ross.

"He tells the story of this man's guilt."

"Very true, but did not suggest hanging him."

"Not being here himself, his letter stands as a witness against this intended murderer, and I say hang him."

"He certainly is guilty," assumed the colonel.

"I do not deny that, but he is the last of his gang, and so let him go at that," urged Sule Ross.

"Men, do you not say this man should hang, that Yellow Dust City would be the better off for it, and it serve as an example and warning that we will not tolerate lawlessness and murder here?"

Sunflower Sam thus appealed to the crowd.

There answered him a roar of affirmatives.

"What if he had killed that Indian chief? Why, we would have had in the spring thousands of warriors here to avenge him."

"What if he had killed Buffalo Bill, the great army scout? Why, we would have a military post planted right here."

"Men, this man must hang!"

This seemed the opinion of all, and the words of the Shasta Sport raised yells at once to hang him.

"Hang him!"

"He deserves it!"

"It will be a good example."

"Buffalo Bill treated him white last night, and then that fellow wanted to kill him."

These were the cries, and there was not a dissenting voice now, save the victim's.

He cried loudly for mercy, and begged for his life, if only for a few days.

The crowd was deaf to entreaty, and, thoroughly infuriated now, they dragged him from his horse, and ten minutes after he was swinging in midair, having been drawn up by many willing hands over the limb of a tree that had served time and again before for a gallows, and had the names of the hanged ones cut into the bark of the trunk.

The Scalplock Sam gang had been wiped out!

CHAPTER LIV.

DIVIDED TRAILS.

Buffalo Bill rode on rapidly after leaving the scene of the ambush.

His face was stern set, his eyes burning, for the scenes he had been forced into during the past twelve hours cut him to the quick. It was a terrible thing to take human life, even in self-defense.

After a brisk canter of several miles over the plain, which the winds had swept of the snow, he drew rein and went at a slow pace.

He did not care to overtax the horses. He knew that it was a good two days' ride to the Indian village, and equally that far to the camp of his Crippled Crew.

He had in his mind a place where he could camp for the night, where man and beast could find fairly good shelter from the cold.

Then he and the chief would go separate ways, and each would strive to reach his destination before another night.

In spite of his confidence in the Indian, he did not care to let him know just where he was going.

By the trail he was then following he could, by a wide flank movement, go to the fort, and so he let the chief believe that he was going there, but to pick up some of his scouts on the way.

It would not do to let the Indian know that there was a band of crippled palefaces not seventy-five miles from their village.

Though the chief might be square, there were young bucks in his tribe who would very quickly go hunting for the scalps of the crippled men, in spite of the severe winter.

As they rode together that day the scout did all in his power to let the chief know that the palefaces were as numerous as the leaves of the trees, that their villages were scattered over thousands of miles, and that it would be best for him and his people to bury the hatchet and live in peace with them.

Did they not do so it would be a continual warfare, and many of his braves would be killed, his villages destroyed, and they would be driven further and further from their hunting grounds.

The chief listened as one who realized that the scout told the truth and spoke for his good.

At last he said:

"Me think heap, talk little. Me no forget. Great White Chief talks with straight tongue. Death Hand his brother, and he brother of Death Hand."

The scout was pleased with this much concession from the powerful leader of a big tribe. It meant a great deal.

The ride all day was a bitter cold one, and both horses and riders felt it; but toward sunset the scout turned into one of those sheltered, cedar-clad valleys, so frequently found in the wilds of the west, as though Nature had placed them there for suffering humanity.

There was a stream there, though it

was frozen solid, and a sheltered camping place for men and horses among some boulders.

The pack saddles, rubber blankets, and some cedar boughs Buffalo Bill cut made a retreat for the two men, and pine straw was piled up among the rocks for the horses, which were also securely blanketed.

A large fire was built; the scout was the cook, and, having killed a fine deer before camping, he had a supper that was most acceptable, after the long, hard ride of over fifty miles.

Smoking their pipes after supper, the two comrades, so strangely brought together, wrapped, themselves in their blankets, and were soon fast asleep.

The sun was rising when they awoke, and a good breakfast followed, with another good feed of grain for the horses.

Then it was mount and away, and after several miles the scout halted.

Pointing down a valley, he said:

"I go this way, chief. You keep this mountain trail to your village."

"Me know."

"You will get there by night, I guess, and your people will be glad to see you."

"Heap glad."

"You can tell them that the palefaces are their friends, if they will let them be, and to think of them so, and not let a few bad white men turn them against us."

"We have been foes, chief, for I have followed your trail, and you have followed mine; but we are friends now, brothers. Good-by!"

The bronze-like face of the Indian became mobile; its hardness softened; its stern features revealed the heart away back under the broad breast, and, grasping the hand of Buffalo Bill, as though unable to utter a word, he rode away in silence.

For some time the scout watched him, yet he never looked back, but steadily plodded on his trail, leading his two pack horses and the pony after him in single file.

CHAPTER LV.

THE ARRIVAL.

Buffalo Bill watched the Chief Death Hand until he was out of sight, and then mused:

"Well, he has been an uncompromising foe of the whites, but has always fought us hard and asked no mercy, shown none."

"But now, he has seen that the whites are his friends, if he will allow them to be, and, after his treatment in Yellow Dust City, he will change his views.

"I am hoping for this to lay the foundation of peace with the mountain tribes, and if it does not I will be greatly mistaken and disappointed as well."

"Now to push on to the camp of my Crippled Crew, for I do not care to be caught out to-night without shelter.

"Come, horses, it is a hard ride, but good quarters and a long rest when you get there."

So saying, the scout pressed on his way, at a pace he knew the horses could hold.

He had never been over that part of the country before, but his great experience prevented him from feeling any uneasiness as to his ability to find his way.

His horses were beginning to feel the strain, for he did not halt at noon, fearing the cold would stiffen the animals, when he came upon a landmark he knew.

It was the spot where he came upon the trail of the crippled fugitives.

The sun was then nearing the horizon, and the wind was rising, betokening another storm, so he was glad to feel that in half an hour he would reach the camp of the maimed men.

Soon after the canyon came into view, and there, curling up along the side of the cliff, he saw the smoke from the cabin.

The Crippled Crew were yet alive; and

more, they were cooking their supper, for the odors of broiling bacon came to him on the wind blowing down the deep mountain rift.

Next the cabin came in sight, and he saw a man, with one wooden leg, swinging an axe in a very good way for one who had been so maimed only a few weeks before.

"Ho, Captain Boyd, that is doing well for a cripple!"

The woodcutter dropped his axe, hopped to a tree, where leaned his rifle, and turned quickly.

"Why, Mr. Cody! You startled me, I can tell you."

"Ho, men, Buffalo Bill is here!"

His voice rang out, and the men hastened out of the cabin.

They came with a cheer, too, and crowded around the scout, greeting him as their preserver and best friend.

"I brought you some more supplies, sooner than I expected, and as I came along I killed two deer. How are you all?"

"All alive, sir, and doing splendidly. Those who lost a foot are using home-made wooden legs, and those who lost a hand are doing the hunting and moving about work for the outfit."

"But Surgeon Powell is not with you, sir?"

"No, I left him at the fort, and guided General Easton over to Yellow Dust City, so I came from there."

"Any news there, Mr. Cody?"

"Yes, Boyd, considerable. We will talk it over to-night, for there are men there who are most anxious as to your fate."

"You did not tell them, sir?" asked Bert Boyd, with a tone and look of anxiety.

"Not a word. They think you all must have perished in the storms."

"You see, as a band, they thought it would be well to hit the Blue Belts first and hard, and so you were the sufferers."

"But they did not accomplish all they expected, as other lawless acts have followed."

"Yes, they did not get the right ones," said Boyd, bitterly.

"Not altogether. There are few of the lawless element still left in Yellow Dust City as I can vouch for, though there has been another thinning out, let me tell you, of five in one lot, then five in another."

"Who were they, sir?"

"The first five were Chin-Chin Jim and four men, three of whom were killed and two are prisoners at the fort."

"They are guilty, as I know."

"Then Scalplock Sam and his four comrades came next."

"Good! They were a hard quintette and richly deserved hanging."

"I will tell you about it to-night, for now I wish to look after my well-nigh used up horses, and get these supplies indoors, for it seems I have brought a storm with me," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the darkening skies.

CHAPTER LVI.

ACCOUNTED FOR.

Seated in the comfortable cabin of the Crippled Crew, smoking his pipe after a very hearty supper, Buffalo Bill listened to the howling winds and driving sleet without, and congratulated himself upon having reached such good quarters ahead of the storm.

He also wondered if the Indian chief had reached his village ahead of the storm, though he felt no anxiety regarding him, as he knew it would not be severe enough to check him on the way when he was so near his people.

The Crippled Crew were as pleased as a lot of schoolboys at the arrival of the scout, and listened to his story of his adventures since he left with the greatest of interest.

"There is one consolation, at least, for us, Mr. Cody."

"What is it, Boyd?"

"Why, if it had not been for our misfortune, you would not have found Gen-

eral Easton and his party, and consequently they would have perished in that blizzard."

"That is true, and a cheerful way of looking at it, too."

"But now let me tell you of the happenings at Yellow Dust City and give you all another grain of comfort, too, for had it not been for your exile and sufferings I would not have found Death Hand, the Indian chief, dying in the snow, saved his life, and, I hope, laid the foundation thereby for a peace between his tribe and the whites."

"He came with me part of the way upon my journey here, and returns to his people with a strange story to tell of the palefaces who were his foes."

"I hope, sir, he does not know we are here."

"No, indeed!"

"You see, we have suffered so much and are not yet accustomed to being crippled, so it makes us timid," Boyd explained.

"I do not wonder at it in the least."

Then Buffalo Bill went over all the happenings at Yellow Dust City, the men all most attentive, and now and then making comments and asking questions.

"Do you go back to Yellow Dust City from here, sir?" asked Boyd, after a significant glance around at his comrades.

"No, I shall go to the fort from here."

"And when will you return here, sir?"

"I will leave when the weather permits, remain at the fort until I can get a chance to return here between storms, and Surgeon Powell will accompany me."

"We will also bring horses needed, and come prepared to take you away, for I do not think, now you are all improving so rapidly, there is any need of your remaining here all the winter."

"The fact is, I will need you, Boyd, and I feel that I can guide you away between the storms."

"Where do you wish us to go, sir?"

"To Yellow Dust City."

The Crippled Crew looked at each other in a strange way, and then Boyd asked:

"We will be under your protection, sir?"

"Yes, and Surgeon Powell's."

"We will go, sir."

"You will also be under the protection of Storkeeper Sule Ross, Colonel Camp, and others whom you can trust wholly."

"In fact, the lawlessness that has disgraced Yellow Dust City for so long, I am determined shall cease, and there will soon be a wipe-out there of the evil element that will long be remembered, and more, it will be a warning to other law breakers to keep under cover or leave."

"You have made some important discoveries, then, Mr. Cody?"

"Yes; I have found out that a band is there in comparison to which yours was nothing in the desperado line."

"I know that the twenty-seven who pursued you to your cruel fate were banded together secretly, and have done untold mischief."

"Whether there are more belonging to that outfit I have not yet discovered, but there is one who is doing detective work for me there, and he will find out. He will spot every law breaker in Yellow Dust."

"Do you mind saying who he is, sir?"

"It is Sule Ross."

"The very man for the work, sir."

"You see, I can now account for two-thirds of your torturers."

"Indeed, sir? You certainly have been doing good work, sir."

"I have had good help, and circumstances have aided me."

"Was not Scalplock Sam and his gang a part of the band who pursued us?"

"They were not. Scalplock Sam had only his four followers, and they acted separately from all others."

"I did not know this for certain, but suspected it; still, we had an idea that

Scalplock was the leader of the twenty-seven."

"He was not. It was told me by the two prisoners who have gone with Captain Adams to the fort, that Chin-Chin Jim was the leader."

"No! no! that can't be so."

"I know that, for he was an entirely different style of man; but I will ferret him out all right, that leader."

"I hope so, sir."

"Of the twenty-seven, I can account for Chin-Chin Jim and his four, for they were along, and the two who died on the trail returning to Gold Dust."

"Seven."

"Yes, and two men died after reaching Gold Dust, and two lost a limb each."

"Eleven. The two last got some of the medicine they gave us."

"Yes, so are exempt from punishment, in my opinion."

"All goes as you wish, sir."

"That left sixteen, and out of that number I can positively spot eight."

"Good!"

"And the remaining eight Sule Ross will discover, as also any other black sheep deserving of a rope cravat, by the time we reach Yellow Dust."

"We are subject to your orders, Mr. Cody."

"But now, sir, I wish to tell you the secret I hinted at, when you were here before."

CHAPTER LVII.

THE CRIPPLED CREW'S SECRET.

What it could be that Bert Boyd was so anxious to make known to him Buffalo Bill could not guess.

He saw that the leader and his men certainly had something which they deemed of great importance to communicate.

"See here, Boyd, let me say this to you, that if you are going to tell me anything to incriminate yourselves, don't do so. You have suffered most terribly, be your crimes what they may, and that, in my mind, atones for what you have done."

"Others will doubtless think as I do, and all I expect of you is to go your way in future on a different trail from the one you set out to follow in Yellow Dust City."

"For this reason I take you back to Yellow Dust, instead of to the fort, where I fear a certain influence might be brought to bear to try you, without taking into consideration what you have already suffered."

"Don't tell me, therefore, anything to mitigate against yourselves."

The men looked at each other and smiled, when Bert Boyd replied:

"You don't mind if we say a word in our favor, Mr. Cody, that may make you think less hard of us?"

"No, indeed!"

"Then, sir, I wish to tell you that we have been playing an underhand game in Yellow Dust."

"I have heard of your being card sharps and worse."

"It is not that. We are, in a measure, card sharps, for each one of us was a skilled hand with the pasteboards; but, sir, we were not professionals—we never cheated a man at a game in our lives, or, if one of us did so, I have yet to know of it."

Buffalo Bill looked surprised, but said nothing, and Boyd continued:

"You see, we appeared what we were not. We went to Yellow Dust and invested in a mine. We looked for little profit from it, and yet we struck it rich."

"Indeed? Rich in what respect?"

"Why, finding the mine was paying well, we hid our gold as we dug it, except what we sent East, and what we lived on."

"This output we did not let the men of Yellow Dust know about. We went about life there in our own way, did not mingle much individually with the people, but were always around."

"We played cards for a purpose, yet were almost invariably successful."

"We kept together because we did not care for trouble, and so were too strong for any few desperadoes to pick a quarrel with, or jump upon, except in several cases, and then we came out on top."

"I have heard that your band was thoroughly organized, and more—that you were a very dangerous lot."

Boyd smiled and replied:

"Far more dangerous, sir, than any man in Yellow Dust City for a moment imagined."

"They seemed to have sized you up very well, Boyd."

"No, sir, not in the slightest degree. Why, Mr. Cody, with all your cleverness, you do not know us as we really are."

Buffalo Bill shook his head doubtfully, as he returned:

"I saw nothing of you as a band in Yellow Dust City, but Sule Ross did, and I have great faith in him."

"What does he say, sir?"

"That you were card sharps, held dangerous sway, but were not, in his opinion, as bad as some believed."

"I thank him for that much, at least, sir."

"But we deceived even him, as we have done all others. Now, to ask you a question, Mr. Cody. Do you recall the great Phoenix Bank robbery of several years ago?"

"Yes, I have heard of it."

"The robbers got away with a very large sum in bank notes."

"Yes, and killed the cashier, did they not?"

"Yes, sir, and the watchman, as well as a policeman and detective who tried to capture them. Yet the robbers got away, and all trace of them was lost."

"There were five, if I remember rightly."

"Yes, five of them, and the bank, the city, the police, and the detective force all offered rewards for the capture of those men—in all a sum amounting to fifty thousand dollars. A fund also, raised to defray the expenses of any detectives who would track them down."

"It was accepted by the chief of a detective bureau in Texas, and he set to work to ferret out the trail of those robbers and murderers."

"While doing so he discovered another trail of crime, namely—that there was a large band of counterfeiters at work, and their fraudulent money was so well made, so skillfully put upon the public, that it was doing the Government a great deal of harm."

"Where these counterfeiters were was the question none could solve; but this chief of whom I spoke felt that he had a clue connecting the Phoenix Bank robbers and murderers with these very counterfeiters. He, in fact, struck a double trail, and determined to follow it to the end."

"At last the trail grew warmer, and, confident that he was right on the scent, he got his best men together and led them upon it."

"Mr. Cody, this chief discovered that the men he sought, robbers, murderers, and counterfeiters were out in the mining country. He knew that the counterfeit money was distributed from Yellow Dust mining camps, and was made there. So he went there with his men and turned miners."

"I am that chief detective, and my crippled pards there are all that remain of our band of fifteen ferrets."

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE STORY TOLD.

To say that Buffalo Bill was surprised would be to put it mildly. That these ferrets had outgeneraled him as well as all of the dwellers in Yellow Dust City, was simply amazing.

Not a hint had been heard from any one that they were other than they professed to be—miners of the rather rough and tough order.

They had gone to the mines to win the bold game they were playing, and so

well had they carried out their disguise that they had actually been driven out of the camps as desperadoes, as men too lawless in their acts to be tolerated even there.

Seeing that Buffalo Bill was wholly astonished, Boyd went on:

"You see, Mr. Cody, we did not intend to be trapped in any way. We brought no sign or badge, paper, or anything to vouch for us; but you may have heard of Boyd Burton."

"Yes, I have, for I know of him through an army officer who got him to do some important detective work for him several years ago."

"Well, I am Boyd Burton, and I simply transferred my name into Burt Boyd."

"I see."

"We were not idle while in Yellow Dust City, for we discovered just who the counterfeiters are."

"That is good."

"And more; they are the very men we wanted to find as the robbers and murderers in the Phoenix Bank affair."

"Better still!"

"Now, there is one thing I suspect—that some one of the gang recognized me, or, perhaps, one of my men, as being a detective, and for this reason we were spotted, and the charge put against us that we were desperadoes and lawless."

"That may have been."

"It must have been, for you know we were accused of secret murder, of cheating at cards, of robbing the cabins of miners while they were away, and of holding up men who had money, when they would be going home at night."

"Yes, I heard all that."

"Now, of not one of those things has a single man of my band been guilty, and I am very sure that I have not."

"You should know, and the purpose of this was what do you think?"

"Why, to get us all hanged; that was their object; to wipe us out and so be rid of any danger that our presence in Gold Dust City might imply for them."

"You must be right, Boyd."

"Well, as they did not get us hanged, and the Secret Vigilantes simply exiled us, drove us out of the camps, it did not suit those who sought our destruction."

"I think I begin to see matters as they really are, Captain Boyd."

"I hope so. We know, now, who they really are, and we are convinced that those who drove us out did not intend we should escape thus. They followed us, and, as you have seen, their intention was to destroy us."

"It was, indeed."

"Exiled, if we really were detectives, we could return and lay hands upon the men we had spotted. To render this impossible, we were maimed and turned loose to die, to starve, to freeze."

"You saved us, or, at least, the remnant of our force which you now see before you, enough of us yet to crush our foes, as I pray we may."

"When we were driven out, Sunflower Sam, the Shasta Sport, generously bought our mine, paying us a large sum for it. Of course, we feel kindly toward him; but, all he paid to us we were robbed of, for you know our torturers robbed us of everything."

"Yes, I know."

"And you say you know all of the twenty-seven, or your pard, Sule Ross will have all known by the time you return?"

"He certainly will."

"That is all we ask. We each have a wrong to avenge, and we will avenge it, through your kind aid. We will gladly return with you to Yellow Dust City. In two weeks more we will be well able to stand the ride."

"I am glad to hear you say this. I will go to the fort as soon as the weather permits, and then get Surgeon Frank Powell. With him I will return here between the storms, and then again, taking

advantage of the weather, we all will go to Yellow Dust City."

"I have already told Sule Ross that we would arrive by night and go direct to his cabin, where you all can hide until I spring the trap which I shall set for the remainder of the twenty-seven. Then the people of Yellow Dust shall know the whole truth about this persecution of you and your men, and be informed of your true character."

Such was the plan adopted, and talking it all over with the Crippled Crew, each one approved it heartily.

CHAPTER LIX.

READY TO SPRING THE TRAP.

Buffalo Bill remained three days in the camp of the maimed detectives; the storm lasted for that time.

Then he started for the fort, having with him a pack horse to provide for delays or accidents by the way.

The third day at noon he reached the fort.

The sentinel reported his coming, and he had a reception of which he might well feel proud.

Captain Charlie Adams and his men had reached the cabin stockade in the driving storm, as Buffalo Bill supposed they would. They had found shelter there for man and beast, had remained until the blizzard ended, then they had gone on to the fort, where Buffalo Bill had been given full praise for the saving of the coach.

Colonel Lennox greeted him most cordially, and feeling that he could then tell the secret he had kept to himself, he made known to his commander all about his Crippled Crew in the Death Valley Mountains, who they were, and just what had been their mission.

The colonel was astonished at what he heard, but said he would leave it all to his chief of scouts to carry out in his own way; yet advised that it would be well to send Captain Adams and his troop to Yellow Dust.

"If it can be arranged, sir, so that he reaches there about the time we do it would be a great help to us," was Buffalo Bill's opinion on that point.

"Well, you can arrange that with Captain Adams, for I believe you would prefer him to go."

"Ah, yes, sir; for he understands just what to do in the right moment and does it."

"Then you see him," said Colonel Lennox.

That night Buffalo Bill had a long talk with Surgeon Powell, and that officer was also greatly surprised at what the scout had to tell him.

"Of course, I am with you, Bill," he said, "with you, if it leads to death!"

The next day it was a talk with Captain Charlie Adams, and he being also let into the secret, said:

"I shall take forty men with me, at least, Cody, and you can just tell me when to be there, and depend upon it we will be."

So it was arranged, and, after a week spent at the fort, Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell left one morning early just after a clearing up of the weather, and started on the trail to the camp of the exiled detectives.

They carried with them extra horses, and made the ride by easy stages, stopping the first night at the stockade cabin.

The day after their departure Captain Charlie Adams and forty men, not including a lieutenant, started for the stockade cabin, there to stop a couple of days, another two at the Cave Canyon, and then to push on to Yellow Dust City.

Should the weather come on to storm, then it was understood that the captain and his men would retreat to the stockade cabin, and the night of the second day after the clearing up they would ride into Yellow Dust City, for Buffalo Bill had arranged to get there about that time.

Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell made

the camp of the Crippled Crew the second day after leaving the fort, arriving at noon.

They were greeted with the greatest cordiality.

Examining his patients, Surgeon Powell found them all in good condition, and said that they were fully able to take the long ride.

But, as the weather was threatening again, it was decided to remain in camp until it cleared again before starting.

This was accordingly done, and when the weather cleared the start was made.

The men had become accustomed to the loss of their limbs and got along better than the scout had anticipated they would.

It was midnight of the third day that they came in sight of the lights of Yellow Dust City.

Without attracting the attention of any one, in fact, not being seen by any one, they rode into the yard of Sule Ross, and Buffalo Bill, having ridden on ahead, had prepared for their welcome.

Their horses were soon put away, and they had comfortable quarters in the house of the storekeeper.

"A troop of cavalry arrived at the Golden Arms not half an hour ago," announced Sule Ross.

"That is all right, Ross; it is part of the programme. Now tell me what else you know."

"Every man of that band, Bill. I'll go up to the colonel's to-night and have him call the people to a meeting at noon, and then you can strike your blow," was the answer.

CHAPTER LX.

BUFFALO BILL CONFRONTS THE KING-PIN SCOUNDREL.

Buffalo Bill appeared in Yellow Dust City the next morning, to the surprise of the miners going to their work, for, after his departure with the Indian chief, many feared that he had been lost in the blizzards.

The coach of Bob White had made a run back again to Yellow Dust City, bringing several officers on their way to the fort, and the driver himself had undertaken to guide them through, taking advantage between storms to do so.

They had gotten through there by hard riding, and in the same way Bob White had returned, accompanied by several men whose term of enlistment had expired.

As the driver had himself gone, it was thought at Yellow Dust City that he was carrying the general's dispatches that Buffalo Bill had intended to take.

Upon the return from the fort Bob White and the men with him had been held up by several masked men right out of Yellow Dust City, and the poor soldiers had been robbed of all their pay, which was considerable.

They were still in Yellow Dust, awaiting to get away, and not knowing just what to do.

Where Buffalo Bill had gone with the Indian chief, the people of Gold Dust could not imagine, for Bob White had reported the scout as not having returned to the fort.

Yet, here he was in Yellow Dust again, coming alone, it was supposed, while at the same time Captain Adams and his troop had arrived. It was thought the troop was to convoy some one to the fort expected on the coach when Bob White should next bring it through.

That night at the saloon the colonel had given the crowd to understand that an important capture had been made, by whom, where, or who it was he did not say, but it was intended to let it be known that day at noon.

Then the fate of the captured, whoever it might be, would be settled, and the crowd were all told to be on hand.

Before the hour, however, Buffalo Bill left the cabin of Sule Ross to go up to the Golden Arms.

The day was a complete change from what the weather had been of late, hav-

ing come off almost warm, and the sun was shining brightly.

Great coats were thrown aside, and the men, not caring to go to work, to give it up and be on hand at noon, were lolling about the saloons, the store, and the Golden Arms.

Captain Adams had not yet appeared, and his men were keeping close about the tavern or the stables.

As he reached the Golden Arms, Buffalo Bill saw the Shasta Sport, approaching him.

Buffalo Bill did not have his overcoat on, merely a jacket, and if he was armed the weapons were well concealed, but that he was armed might well be surmised, knowing what kind of a place Yellow Dust City was.

The Sport from Shasta, always fond of dress, was now rigged up in his best, having on a new silk shirt, the front of which was embroidered with three of the big filigree sunflowers—his distinguishing emblem.

He carried a revolver on one side in front, another on his hip, as was his wont, and wore about his neck a charm which never was wanting when he appeared in public.

It was an opal set in gold and swung about his neck by a chain. In truth, it was a woman's necklace.

Seeing Buffalo Bill, he halted, turned toward him, and called out:

"I am glad to see you back, Mr. Cody, and, from what the colonel tells me, I guess you brought in last night some material for the Secret Vigilantes today."

The Sport extended his hand, and Buffalo Bill grasped it with a grip that meant "business," for Sunflower Sam, strong as he was, winced.

Holding the hand in this clutch, the scout said:

"Sunflower Sam, I arrest you as the chief of the worst gang of cutthroats that ever disgraced even a mining camp."

Still grasping the hand of the now white-faced Sam with his right hand, Buffalo Bill clutched in his left a small derringer pistol, a most terrible weapon at close quarters, the muzzle pointed toward the Sport.

Though he had turned deadly pale, the man from Shasta remained outwardly calm. He could not release his hand from the steel-like grasp. He dared not make a move with his disengaged hand to draw his revolver.

The crowd had seen and heard what was said by Buffalo Bill, and were gathering fast about them, though not a man had been very near when they first met.

Among those appearing were the colonel, Carl Waring, and Sule Ross.

As Ross came up Buffalo Bill gave the order:

"Put the steels upon him, Ross!"

Instantly the storekeeper obeyed, and the Sunflower Sport was manacled and disarmed at the same time.

"See here, Cody, a joke can be carried too far," protested the sport.

"This is no joke, Shasta, as you well realize. The law has got you fast at last."

"Colonel, what does this outrage mean?" demanded the sport, scrutinizing the crowd.

Buffalo Bill looked toward Sule Ross, who said in a low tone:

"All here, chief!"

The scout saw that about half of the population of Yellow Dust City were there, and the other half were coming as fast as they could make their way.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE EVIL SPIRIT OF IT ALL.

As the crowd gathered out of the Golden Arms came Captain Charlie Adams, and his men immediately began to form around the multitude, but not pressing toward the centre, but pausing on the outer edge of the crowd.

Then at a signal from Ross, the scout said in his terse way:

"Men, I have struck at your idol, it is true; but I know what I am about, and I accuse him first of being a murderer, robber, and fugitive from justice, one who planned and led the work in the Phoenix Bank burglary, of which many of you have heard."

"It is false!" yelled the disarmed sport.

"It is true. That, however, is but a part of his criminal record, a minor part. Well born and bred, he went wrong early in life from the innate deviltry in his nature. He is an adept forger, and an expert counterfeiter of United States money—hold there!"

"The man who attempts to leave this crowd will be shot dead!"

The movement of men in the assembled host to draw toward the outer edge of the circle was checked by this warning.

Then Buffalo Bill resumed:

"Now to the record, men, of this man from Shasta, as he calls himself. He is not from Shasta at all; that dodge was merely one of his blinds. He has here in Gold Dust City his whole outfit for counterfeiting Government money, and his accomplices are in this very crowd."

"Suspecting that detectives were here upon his track, he organized the Secret Vigilantes, and at once began to trump up charges against certain men."

"His first blow fell upon the Blue Belts, and he deceived Colonel Camp, Sule Ross, Carl Waring, and other good men and true, who associated with him as Vigilantes to free the camp from rogues and preserve the peace. It was by his trickery and vile lies that the band of fifteen men were exiled from this camp."

"The charges against them were utterly false and devilish, for these very men, Burt Boyd and his Blue Belts, actually were Government detectives here for the purpose of entrapping this human devil and his numerous followers."

"He had in his band, including himself, twenty-seven men. Some of them were road-agents, and it was five of his imps who attacked General Easton and his daughter."

"Those twenty-seven, their sport chief being in the lead, went on the trail of the Blue Belts purposely to destroy them."

"They overtook the exiles, robbed them of the money they had, that which the sport had paid for the Blue Belt mine, as well, although it was counterfeit, and then they set to work to destroy them."

"It is false!" yelled the prisoner.

"I am dealing in solid facts, good people! I forgot to say that this man was educated as a physician and surgeon, and was a most clever one until he chose a life of dishonor, crime, and deep depravity. As Doctor Augustus Norman he was known then, but he dropped his M. D., and his real name long ago."

"However, he practiced surgery right near here only a few months ago, for he determined to torture the Blue Belts to death; so, with his obedient miscreants, he cut a foot, or a hand, off of each one of the overpowered men."

"He was well-nigh successful in his fiendish work, for, with utterly diabolical purpose, he turned them loose to die of cold and starvation, maimed as they were!"

"But I found the poor maimed victims of this miscreant, found them nearer dead than alive, and all that remains of the Blue Belts, Burt Boyd and six of his comrades, are here to answer for themselves."

Buffalo Bill gave a loud call, and to the amazement of the crowd Burt Boyd came toward them from the cabin of Sule Ross.

It beggars description to describe the scene that followed.

The men spotted by Buffalo Bill and Sule Ross were at once surrounded by the soldiers, and in a short while they, too, were in irons.

The crowd insisted upon hanging them, right then and there, but Buffalo Bill told them that the atrocious scoundrels must be taken East for trial.

Captain Adams and his men surrounded the prisoners, and then Buffalo Bill, Burt Boyd, and others picked from the crowd went on a search to the cabins of the assumed Sam and his associates in wickedness. What they found amply repaid them, for the evidence would hang any man.

It was proof of the sport's guilt of the Phoenix Bank robbery, and three men then with him had been his pals in that affair.

The search supplied proof of his forgeries, and all the counterfeiting outfit was found, as well as the case of surgical instruments with which the monster had amputated the limbs of the unfortunate Blue Belt Brigade detectives.

No further evidence was needed, and all Yellow Dust City was in a furor of excitement over the appalling revelations. Too much could not be done for the Blue Belts, who had so cruelly suffered.

Carl Waring at once bought from them the Blue Belt mine, for the purchase of the sport did not hold good, and Burt Boyd and his men were thus well supplied with money for their trip back.

The guilty men, save the two who had been crippled by freezing, were at once taken to the fort, Buffalo Bill guiding and Captain Charlie Adams and his men guarding.

In safety they arrived, and the surprise sprung upon all at the fort was indeed great. That it won for Buffalo Bill new laurels may be taken for granted.

He bore his honors modestly, as always, and was appointed by Colonel Lennox to escort the prisoners and their detective squad to the nearest railroad station, when, in the early spring, they left the fort.

This service he duly performed, and upon his return was surprised to find a large Indian trail leading to the fort.

A significant find, and in alarm he hastened on to see what it meant.

CHAPTER LXII.

CONCLUSION.

The ovation which Buffalo Bill received in Yellow Dust City on his return from the railway station made his heart thrill with pride, and he learned with pleasure that there had not been a man killed nor a lawless act in the camps since the running down of the Sunflower Sport.

When he discovered the Indian trail leading to the post, the scout naturally suspected mischief; but when he drew near he found the Indians encamped there and quickly ascertained that Death Hand and several hundred braves were there having a pow-wow with Colonel Lennox, for the chief had come to ask his paleface friends to bury the hatchet with his tribe and live in peace.

"This is your work, Cody, and so I shall report it to your honor," said Colonel Lennox, and he turned the chief and his braves over to the scout to entertain.

Three months later word came from the East of the trial and conviction of Doctor Augustus Norman, alias Sunflower Sam, the Shasta Sport, and his sentence to be hanged, while his companions in guilt also were condemned to terms of imprisonment, several of them for life.

Burt Boyd wrote Buffalo Bill, offering to share the big rewards with him, but this the generous-minded scout refused emphatically.

Still later the detective chief wrote again saying that he had reorganized his bureau of secret service men, and had called his corps "Buffalo Bill's Blue Belt Brigade," for never would one of the Crippled Crew forget how much they owed to the matchless pathfinder of the Wild West Wilderness.

THE END.

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